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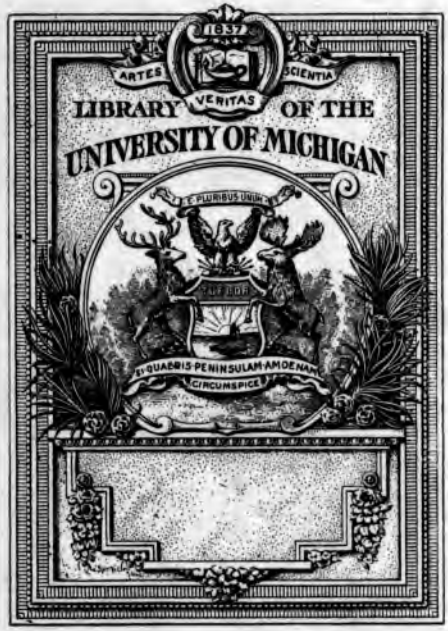
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MARION DARCHE

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A STORY WITHOUT COMMENT

BY

F. MARION CRAWFORD

AUTHOR OF "SARACINESCA," "A ROMAN SINGER," "SANT' ILARIO," ETC.

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MARION DARCHE.

CHAPTER I.

AMONG the many peculiarities which contribute to make New York unlike other cities is the construction of what may be called its social map. As in the puzzles used in teaching children geography, all the pieces are of different shapes, different sizes and different colours; but they fit neatly together in the compact whole though the lines which define each bit are distinctly visible, especially when the map has been long used by the industrious child. What calls itself society everywhere else calls itself society in New York also, but whereas in European cities one instinctively speaks of the social scale, one familiar with New York people will be much more inclined to speak of the social map. I do not mean to hint that society here exists on a dead level, but the absence of tradition, of all acknowledged precedents and of all outward and perceptible distinctions makes it quite impossible

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to define the position of any one set in regard to another by the ordinary scale of superiority or inferiority. In London or Paris, for instance, ambitious persons are spoken of as climbing, in New York it would be more correct to speak of them as migrating or attempting to migrate from one social field to the next. It is impossible to imagine fields real or metaphorical yielding more different growths under the same sky.

The people in all these different sets are very far from being unconscious of one another's existence. Sometimes they would like to change from one set to another and cannot, sometimes other people wish them to change and they will not, sometimes they exchange places, and sometimes by a considerable effort, or at considerable expense, they change themselves. The man whose occupations, or tastes, or necessities, lead him far beyond the bounds of the one particular field to which he belongs, may see a vast deal that is interesting and of which his own particular friends and companions know nothing whatever. There are a certain number of such men in every great city, and there are a certain number of women

also, who, by accident or choice, know a little more of humanity in general than their associates. They recognise each other wherever they meet. They speak the same language. Without secret signs or outward badges they understand instinctively that they belong to the small and exceptional class of human beings. If they meet for the first time, no matter where, the conversation of each is interesting to the other; they go their opposite ways never to meet again, perhaps, but feeling that for a few minutes, or a few hours, they have lived in an atmosphere far more familiar to them than that of their common everyday life. They are generally the people who can accomplish things, not hard to do in themselves but quite out of the reach of those whose life runs in a single groove. They very often have odd experiences to relate and sometimes are not averse to relating them. They are a little mysterious in their ways and they do not care to be asked whither they are going nor whence they come. They are not easily surprised by anything, but they sometimes do not remember to which particular social set an idea, a story, or a prejudice

belongs, especially if they are somewhat preoccupied at the time. This occasionally makes their conversation a little startling, if not incomprehensible, but they are generally considered to be agreeable people and if they have good manners and dress like human beings they are much sought after in society for the simple reason that they are very hard to find.

In New York walking is essentially the luxury of the rich. The hard-working poor man has no time to lose in such old-fashioned sport and he gets from place to place by means of horse cars and elevated roads, by cabs or in his own carriage, according to the scale of his poverty. The man who has nothing to do keeps half-a-dozen horses and enjoys the privilege of walking, which he shares with women and four-footed animals.

The foregoing assertions all bear more or less directly upon the lives of the people concerned in the following story. They all lived in New York, they all belonged to the same little oddly-shaped piece in the social puzzle map, some of them were rich enough to walk, and one of them at least was tolerably well acquainted with a great

many people in a great many other sets. On a certain winter's morning this latter individual was walking slowly down Lexington Avenue in the direction of Gramercy Park. He was walking, not because he was enormously rich, not because he had nothing to do, and not because he was ill. He was suffering momentarily from an acute attack of idleness, very rare in him, but intensely delightful while it lasted.

In all probability Russell Vanbrugh had been doing more work than was good for him, but as he was a man of extremely well-balanced and healthy nervous organisation the one ill effect he experienced from having worked harder than usual was a sudden and irresistible determination to do absolutely nothing for twenty-four hours. He was a lawyer by profession, a Dutchman by descent, a New Yorker by birth, a gentleman by his character and education, if the latter expression means anything, which is doubtful, and so far as his circumstances were concerned he was neither rich nor poor as compared with most of his associates, though some of his acquaintances looked up to him as little short of a millionaire, while others could not have conceived

it possible to exist at all with his income. In appearance he was of middle height, strongly built but not stout, and light on his feet. On the whole he would have been called a dark man, for his eyes were brown and his complexion was certainly not fair. His features were regular and straight but not large, of a type which is developing rapidly in America and which expresses clearly enough the principal national characteristics — energy, firmness, self-esteem, absence of tradition, and, to some extent, of individuality — in so far as the faculties are so evenly balanced as to adapt themselves readily to anything required of them. Russell Vanbrugh was decidedly good-looking and many people would have called him handsome. He was thirty-five years of age, and his black hair was turning a little gray at the temples, a fact which was especially apparent as he faced the sun in his walk. He was in no hurry as he strolled leisurely down the pavement, his hands in the pockets of his fur coat, glancing idly at the quiet houses as he passed. The usual number of small boys was skating about on rollers at the corners of the streets, an occasional trio of nurse, perambulator and baby came into view for a

moment across the sunlit square ahead of him, and a single express-waggon was halting before a house on the other side of the street, with one of its wheels buried to the hub in a heap of mud-dyed snow. That was all. Few streets in the world can be as quiet as Lexington Avenue at mid-day. It looks almost like Boston. Russell Vanbrugh loved New York in all its aspects and in all its particulars, singly and wholly, in winter and summer, with the undivided affection which natives of great capitals often feel for their own city. He liked to walk in Lexington Avenue, and to think of the roaring, screaming rush in Broadway. He liked to escape from sudden death on the Broadway crossing and to think of the perambulator and the boys on roller skates in Lexington Avenue; and again, he was fond of allowing his thoughts to wander down town to the strange regions which are bounded by the Bowery, Houston Street, the East River and Park Row. It amused him to watch his intensely American surroundings and to remember at the same time that New York is the third German city in the world. He loved contrasts and it was this taste, together with his daily occu-

pation as a criminal lawyer, which had led him to extend his acquaintance beyond the circle in which his father and mother had dined and danced and had their being.

He was thinking — for people can think while receiving and enjoying momentary impressions which have nothing to do with their thoughts — he was thinking of a particularly complicated murder case in which the murderer had made use of atropine to restore the pupils of his victim's eyes to their natural size lest their dilatation should betray the use of morphia. He was watching the boys, the house, the express-cart, and the distant perambulator, and at the same time he was hesitating as to whether he should light a cigarette or not. He was certainly suffering from the national disease, which is said by medical authorities to consist in thinking of three things at once. He was just wondering whether, if the expressman murdered the nurse and used atropine the boy would find it out, when the door of a house he was passing was opened and a young girl came out upon the brown stone steps and closed it behind her. Her

gray eyes met his brown ones and they both started slightly and smiled. The girl's bright colour grew a little more bright, and Vanbrugh's eyelids contracted a little as he stopped and bowed.

"Oh — is that you?" asked Miss Dolly Maylands, pausing an instant.

"Good morning," answered Vanbrugh, smiling again as she tripped over the brown steps and met him on the pavement.

"I suppose your logical mind saw the absurdity of answering my question," said Dolly, holding out a slender gloved hand.

"I see you have been at your charities again," answered Vanbrugh, watching her fresh face closely.

"You say that as you would say, 'You have been at your tricks again.' Why do you tease me? But it is quite true. How did you guess it?"

"Because you began by chaffing me. That shows that you are frivolous to-day. When you have been doing something serious you are always frivolous. When you have been dancing you are

always funereal. It is very easy to tell what you have been doing."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

Miss Maylands frequently made use of this expression — a strong one in its way.

"I know I ought," answered Vanbrugh with humility.

"But you are not. You are a hypocrite, like all the rest of them." Dolly's face was grave, but she glanced at her companion as she spoke.

"Of course I am a hypocrite. Life is too short. A man cannot waste his time in hacking his way through the ice mountain of truth when he may trot round to the other side by the path of tact."

"I hate metaphors."

"So do I."

"Why do you use them, then?"

"It is righteous to do the things one does not like to do, is it not?"

"Not if they are bad."

"Oh! then I am good, am I?"

"Perhaps. I never make rash assertions."

"No? You called me a hypocrite just now,

and said I was like the rest of them. Was not that a rash assertion?"

"Oh dear! You are too logical! I give it up."

"I am so glad."

For a few moments they walked along in silence, side by side, in the sunshine. They were a couple pleasant to look at, yet not very remarkable in any way. Dolly Maylands was tall —almost as tall as Vanbrugh, but much fairer. She had about her the singular freshness which clings to some people through life. It is hard to say wherein the quality lies, but it is generally connected with the idea of great natural vitality. There are two kinds of youth. There is the youth of young years, which fades and disappears altogether, and there is the youth of nature which is abiding, or which, at most, shrivels and dies as rose leaves wither, touched with faint colour, still and fragrant to the last. Dolly's freshness was in her large gray eyes, her bright chestnut hair, her smooth, clear skin, her perfect teeth, her graceful figure, her easy motion. But it was deeper than all these, and one looking at

her felt that it would outlast them all, and that they would all try hard to outlast one another. For the rest, the broad brow showed thought, if not intellect, and the mouth, rather large for the proportion of the lower face, but not at all heavy, told of strength and courage, if not of real firmness. Dolly Maylands was large, well grown, thin, fresh and thoughtful, with a dash of the devil, but of a perfectly innocent devil, only a little inclined to laugh at his own good works and to prefer play to prayers, as even angels may when they are very young and healthy, and have never done anything to be sorry for.

"You seem to be walking with me," observed Dolly presently.

"Well — yes — I suppose that is the impression we are giving the expressman over there."

"And in court, in one of your cases, if he were a witness, he would probably give the idea that we met in Lexington Avenue by appointment. By the bye, one does not walk in Lexington Avenue in the morning."

"That is what we are doing," answered Vanbrugh imperturbably.

"You know that it is compromising, I suppose."

"So do you."

"Then why do you do it?"

"Why do we do it? Is that what you meant to ask?"

"I did not mean anything."

"So I supposed, from what you said." Vanbrugh smiled and Dolly laughed as their eyes met.

"I was here first," said Vanbrugh after a moment.

"Not at all. I have been at least an hour at old Mrs. Trehearne's."

"I may have seen you go in, and I may have waited all that time to catch you on the door-step."

"So like you! Why are you not defending the chemist who cremated his fifth wife alive in a retort, or the cashier who hypnotised the head of his firm and made him sign cheques with his eyes shut, or the typhus-germ murderer, or something nice and interesting of that sort? Are you growing lazy in your old age, Mr. Vanbrugh?"

"Awfully!"

"How well you talk. When I have made a beautiful long speech and have beaten my memory

black and blue for words I cannot remember, just to be agreeable — you say 'awfully,' and think you are making conversation."

"I am not good at conversation."

"Apparently not. However, you will not have much chance of showing off your weakness this morning."

"Why not?"

"You might say you are sorry! Why not? Because I am not going far."

"How far?"

"That is a rude question. It is like asking me where I am going. But I will be nice and tell you — just to make you feel your inferiority. I am going to see Marion Darche."

"Mrs. Darche lunches about this time."

"Exactly. It is within the bounds of possibility that I may be going to lunch with her."

"Oh, quite!"

Again there was a short pause as the two walked on together. Dolly took rather short, quick steps. Vanbrugh did not change his gait. There are men who naturally fall into the step of persons with whom they are walking. It shows

an imitative disposition and one which readily accepts the habits of others. Neither Dolly nor her companion were people of that sort.

"I was thinking of Mrs. Darche," said Dolly at last.

"So was I. Extremes meet."

"They have met in that case, at all events," answered Dolly, growing serious. "It would not be easy to imagine a more perfectly ill-matched couple than Marion and her husband."

"Do you think so?" asked Vanbrugh, who was never inclined to commit himself.

"Think so? I know it! And you ought to know it, too. You are always there. Nobody is more intimate there than you are."

"Yes, — I often see them."

"Yes," said Dolly looking keenly at him, "and I believe you know much more about them than you admit. You might as well tell me."

"I have nothing especial to tell," answered Vanbrugh quietly.

"There is something wrong. Well — if you will not tell me, Harry Brett will, some day. He is not half so secretive as you are."

"That does not mean anything. The word secretive is not to be found in any respectable dictionary, nor in any disreputable one either, so far as I know."

"How horrid you are! But it is quite true. Harry Brett is not in the least like you. He says just what he thinks."

"Does he? Lucky man! That is just what I am always trying to do. And he tells you all about the Darches, does he?"

"Oh no! He has never told me anything. But then, he would."

"That is just the same, you know."

"What makes you think there is anything wrong?" asked Vanbrugh, changing his tone and growing serious in his turn.

"So many things — it is dreadful! What o'clock is it?"

"Ten minutes to one."

"Have you time for another turn before I go in?"

"Of course — all the time. We can walk round Gramercy Park and down Irving Place."

Instinctively both were silent as they passed

the door of Marion Darche's house and did not resume their conversation till they were twenty paces further down the street. Then Vanbrugh was the first to speak.

"If it is possible for you and me to talk seriously about anything, Miss Maylands, I should like to speak to you about the Darches."

"I will make a supreme effort and try to be serious. As for you —"

Dolly glanced at Vanbrugh, smiled and shook her head, as though to signify that his case was perfectly hopeless.

"I shall do well enough," he answered, "I am used to gravity. It does not upset my nerves as it does yours."

"You shall not say that gravity upsets my nerves!"

"Shall not? Why not?" inquired Vanbrugh.

Dolly walked more slowly, putting down her feet with a little emphasis, so to say.

"Because I say you shall not. That ought to be enough."

"Considering that you can stand idiot asylums, kindergartens, school children, the rector and the

hope of the life to come, and are still alive enough to dance every night, your nerves ought to be good. But I did not mean to be offensive — only a little wholesome glass of truth as an appetiser before Mrs. Darche's luncheon."

"Puns make me positively ill at this hour!"

"I will never do it again — never, never."

"You are not making much progress in talking seriously about the Darches. I believe it was for that purpose that you proposed to drag me round and round this hideous place, amongst the babies and the nurses and the small yellow dogs — there goes one!"

"Yes — as you say — there he goes, doomed to destruction in the pound. Be sorry for him. Show a little sympathy — poor beast! Drowning is not pleasant in this weather."

"Oh you do not really think he will be drowned?"

"No. I think not. If you look, you will see that he is a private dog, so to say, though he is small and yellow. He is also tied to the back of the perambulator — look — the fact is proved by his having got through the railings and almost

upset the baby and the nurse by stopping them short. Keep your sympathy for the next dog, and let us talk about the Darches, if you and I can stop chaffing."

"Speak for yourself, Mr. Vanbrugh. You frightened me by telling me the creature was to be drowned."

"Very well. I apologise. Since he is to live, what do you think is the matter with the Darche establishment? Let me put the questions. Is old Simon Darche in his right mind, so as to understand what is going on? Is John Darche acting honestly by the Company — and by other people? Is Mrs. Darche happy?"

Miss Maylands paused at the corner of the park, looked through the railings and smoothed her muff of black Persian sheep with one hand before she made any reply. Russell Vanbrugh watched her face and glanced at the muff from time to time.

"Well?"

"I cannot answer your questions," Dolly answered at last, looking into his eyes. "I do not know the answers to any of them, and yet I

have asked them all of myself. As to the first two, you ought to know the truth better than I. You understand those things better than I do. And the last — whether Marion is happy or not — have you any particular reason for asking it?"

"No." Vanbrugh answered without the slightest hesitation, but an instant later his eyes fell before hers. She sighed almost inaudibly, laid her hand upon the railing and with the other raised the big muff to her face so that it hid her mouth and chin. To her, the lowering of his glance meant something — something, perhaps, which she had not expected to find.

"You ask on general — general principles?" she inquired presently, with a rather nervous smile.

But Vanbrugh did not smile. The expression of his face did not change.

"Yes, on general principles," he answered. "It is the main question, after all. If Mrs. Darche is not happy, there must be some very good reason for her unhappiness, and the reason cannot be far to seek. If the old gentleman is really losing his mind or is going to have softening of the brain — which is the same thing after all —

well, that might be it. But I do not believe she cares so much for him as all that. If he were her own father it would be different. But he is John's father, and John — I do not know what to say. It would depend upon the answers to the other questions."

"Which I cannot give you," answered Dolly. "I wish I could."

Dolly gave the railings a little parting kick to knock the snow from the point of her overshoe, lowered her muff and began to walk again. Vanbrugh walked beside her in silence.

"It is a very serious question," she began again, when they had gone a few steps. "Of course you think I spend all my time in frivolous charities and serious flirtations, and dances, and that sort of thing. But I have my likes and dislikes, and Marion is my friend. She is older than I, and when we were girls I had a little girl's admiration for a big one. That lasted until she got married and I grew up. Of course it is not the same thing now, but we are very fond of each other. You see I have never had a sister nor any relations to

speak of, and in a certain way she has taken the place of them all. At first I thought she was happy, though I could not see how that could be, because —"

Dolly broke off suddenly, as though she expected Vanbrugh to understand what was passing in her mind. He said nothing, however, and did not even look at her as he walked silently by her side. Then she glanced at him once or twice before she spoke again.

"Of course you know what I am thinking of," she said at last. "You must have thought it all too, then and now, and very often. Of course — you had reason to."

"What reason?" Vanbrugh looked up quickly, as he asked the question.

"Oh, I cannot go into all that! You understand as well as I do. Besides, it is not a pleasant subject. John Darche was successful, young, rich, everything you like — except just what one does like. I always felt that she had married him by mistake."

"By mistake? What a strange idea. And who should the right man have been, pray?"

"Oh, no! She thought he was the right man, no doubt. It was the mistake of fate, or providence, or whatever you call the thing, if it was a mistake at all."

"After all," said Vanbrugh, "what reason have we, you or I, for saying that they are not perfectly happy? Perhaps they are. People are happy in so many different ways. After all, John Darche and his wife do not seem to quarrel. They only seem to disagree — or rather — "

"Yes," answered Dolly, "that is exactly it. It is not everything one sees or hears in the house. It is the suspicion that there are unpleasant things which are neither seen or heard by any of us. And then, the rest — your questions about the business, which I cannot answer and which I hardly understand. There are so many people concerned in an enormous business like that, that I cannot imagine how anything could be done without being found out."

"However such things are done," answered Vanbrugh, gravely, "and sometimes they are found out, and sometimes they are not. Let us hope for the best in this case."

"What would be the best if there were anything to find out?" asked Dolly, lowering her voice as they paused before Simon Darche's house. "Would it be better that John Darche should be caught for the sake of the people who would lose by him, or would it be better for his wife's sake that he should escape?"

"That is a question altogether beyond my judgment, especially on such short notice. Shall we go in?"

"We? Are you coming too?"

"Yes, I am going to lunch with the Darches too."

"And you never told me so? That is just like you! You get all you can out of me and you tell me nothing."

"I have nothing to tell," answered Vanbrugh calmly, "but I apologise all the same. Shall I ring the bell?"

"Unless you mean to take me round Gramercy Park again and show me more nurses and perambulators and dirty dogs. Yes, ring the bell please. It is past one o'clock."

A moment later Miss Dolly Maylands and Mr. Russell Vanbrugh disappeared behind the extremely well-kept door of Simon Darche's house in Lexington Avenue.

CHAPTER II.

SIMON DARCHE stood at the window of his study, as Dolly and Vanbrugh entered the house. He was, at that time, about seventy-five years of age, and the life he had led had told upon him, as an existence of over excitement ultimately tells upon all but the very strong. Physically, he was a fine specimen of the American old gentleman. He was short, well knit, and still fairly erect; his thick creamy-white hair was smoothly brushed and parted behind, as his well-trimmed white beard was carefully combed and parted before. He had bushy eyebrows in which there were still some black threads. His face was ruddy and polished, like fine old pink silk that has been much worn. But his blue eyes had a vacant look in them, and the redness of the lids made them look weak; the neck was shrunken at the back and just behind the ears, and though the head was well poised on the

shoulders, it occasionally shook a little, or dropped suddenly out of the perpendicular, forwards · or to one side, not as though nodding, but as though the sinews were gone, so that it depended altogether upon equilibrium and not at all upon muscular tension for its stability. This, however, was almost the only outward sign of physical weakness. Simon Darche still walked with a firm step, and signed his name in a firm round hand at the foot of the documents brought to him by his son for signature.

He had perfect confidence in John's judgment, discretion and capacity, for he and his son had worked together for nearly twenty years, and John had never during that time contradicted him. Since the business had continued to prosper through fair and foul financial weather, this was, in Simon Darche's mind, a sufficient proof of John's great superiority of intelligence. The Company's bonds and stock had a steady value on the market, the interest on the bonds was paid regularly and the Company's dividends were uniformly large. Simon Darche continued to be President, and John Darche had now been Treasurer during

more than five years. Altogether, the Company had proved itself to be a solid concern, capable of surviving stormy days and of navigating serenely in the erratic flood and ebb of the down-town tide. It was, indeed, apparent that before long a new President must be chosen, and the choice was likely to fall upon John. In the ordinary course of things a man of Simon Darche's age could not be expected to bear the weight of such responsibility much longer; but so far as any one knew, his faculties were still unimpaired and his strength was still quite equal to any demands which should be made upon it, in the ordinary course of events. Of the business done by the Company, it is sufficient to say that it was an important branch of manufacture, that the controlling interest was generally in the hands of the Darches themselves and that its value largely depended upon the possession of certain patents which, of course, would ultimately expire.

Simon Darche stood at the window of his study and looked out, smoking a large, mild cigar which he occasionally withdrew from his lips and contemplated thoughtfully before knocking off the ash,

and returning it to his mouth. It was a very fine cigar indeed, equal in quality to everything which Simon Darche had consumed during the greater part of his life, and he intended to enjoy it to the end, as he had enjoyed most things ever since he had been young. John, he often said, did not know how to enjoy anything; not that John was in a hurry, or exhibited flagrantly bad taste, or professed not to care — on the contrary, the younger man was deliberate, thoughtful and fastidious in his requirements — but there was an odd strain of asceticism in him, which his father had never understood. It certainly was not of a religious nature, but it would have gone well together with a saintly disposition such as John did not possess. Perhaps indeed, John had the saintly temperament without the sanctity, and that, after all, may be better than nothing. He was thinner than his father and of a paler complexion; his hair was almost red, if not quite, and his eyes were blue — a well-built man, not ungraceful but a little angular, careful of his appearance and possessed of perfect taste in regard to dress, if in nothing else. He bestowed great attention upon his hands,

which were small with slender fingers pointed at the tips, and did not seem to belong to the same epoch as the rest of him; they were almost unnaturally white, but to his constant annoyance they had an unlucky propensity to catch the dust, as one says of some sorts of cloth. If it be written down that a man has characteristically clean hands, some critic will be sure to remark that gentlemen are always supposed to have clean hands, especially gentlemen of the Anglo-Saxon race. It is a fact, nevertheless, that however purely Anglo-Saxon the possessor may be, there are hands which are naturally not clean and which neither ordinary scrubbing nor the care of the manicure can ever keep clean for more than an hour. People who are in the habit of noticing hands are well aware of the fact, which depends upon the quality of the skin, as the reputation for cleanliness itself generally does. John Darche's hands did not satisfy him as the rest of himself did.

So far as people knew, he had no vices, nor even the small tastes and preferences which most men have. He did not drink wine, he did not smoke, and he rarely played cards. He was a

fairly good rider and rode for exercise, but did not know a pastern from a fetlock and trusted to others to buy his horses for him. He cared nothing for sport of any kind; he had once owned a yacht for a short time, but he had never been any further than Newport in her and had sold her before the year was out. He read a good deal in a desultory way and criticised everything he read, when he talked, but on the whole he despised literature as a trifle unworthy of a serious man's attention. His religious convictions were problematic, to say the least of it, and his outward practice took the somewhat negative form of never swearing, even when he was alone. He did not raise his voice in argument, if he ever argued, nor in anger, though he had a very bad temper. John Darche could probably say as disagreeable things as any man living, without exhibiting the slightest apparent emotion. He was not a popular man. His acquaintances disliked him; his friends feared him; his intimates and the members of his household felt that he held them at a distance and that they never really understood him. His father bestowed an almost childish admiration upon him, for

which he received a partial compensation in John's uniformly respectful manner and unvarying outward deference. In the last appeal, all matters of real importance were left to the decision of Simon Darche, who always found it easy to decide, because the question, as it reached him, was never capable of more than one solution.

It is clear from what has been said that John Darche was not an amiable character. But he had one small virtue, or good trait, or good point, be it called as it may. He loved his wife, if not as a woman and a companion, at least as a possession. The fact was not apparent to the majority of people, least of all, perhaps, to Mrs. Darche herself, who was much younger than her husband and whose whole and loyal soul was filled with his cast-off beliefs, so to say, or, at least, with beliefs which he would have cast off if he had ever possessed them. Nevertheless, he was accustomed to consider her as one of his most valuable belongings, and he might have been very dangerous, had his enormous dormant jealousy been roused by the slightest show on her part of preference for any one of the half-dozen men who

were intimate in the house. He, on his side, gave her no cause for doubting his fidelity. He was not loving, his manner was not affectionate, he often lost his temper and said cruel things to her in his cruel way; but so far as she knew he did not exchange ten words daily with any other woman, excepting Mrs. Willoughby, her aunt, and Dolly Maylands, her intimate friend. He was systematic in his daily comings and goings, and he regularly finished his evenings at one of the clubs. He slept little, but soundly, ate sparingly and without noticing what was offered him, drank four cups of tea and a pint of Apollinaris every day and had never been ill in his life, which promised to be long, active, uneventful and not overflowing with blessings for any one else.

At first it might seem that there was not much ground for the few words exchanged by Russell Vanbrugh and Dolly Maylands about the Darches' trouble before they entered the house. To all appearances, Simon Darche was in his normal frame of mind and had changed little during the last five years. So far as any one could judge, the Company was as solid as ever. In her outward

manner and conversation Marion Darche seemed as well satisfied with her lot as she had been on the day of her marriage, when John had represented to her all that a man should be, — much that another man, whom she had loved, or liked almost to loving, in her early girlhood, had not been. The surface of her life was calm and unemotional, reflecting only the sunshine and storm of the social weather under which she lived in the more or less close companionship of half a hundred other individuals in more or less similar circumstances.

There is just enough truth in most proverbs to make them thoroughly disagreeable. Take, for instance, the saying that wealth is not happiness. Of course it is not, any more than food and lodging, shoes and clothing, which are the ultimate forms of wealth, can be called happiness. But surely, wealth and all that wealth gives constitute a barrier against annoyance, mental and physical, which has almost as much to do with the maintenance of happiness in the end, as "climate and the affections." The demonstration is a simple one. Poverty can of itself under

certain circumstances be a source of unhappiness. The possession of riches therefore is a barrier against the possibility of at least one sort of misery and relatively increases the chances of being happy on the whole. It is tolerably certain, that, without money, John Darche would have been little short of insufferable, and that his wife would have been chief among the sufferers. The presence of a great fortune preserved the equilibrium and produced upon outsiders the impression of real felicity.

Nevertheless, both Vanbrugh and Dolly Maylands, as has been seen, considered the fortune unsafe and the apparent peace problematic. They were among the most intimate friends of the Darche household and were certainly better able to judge of the state of affairs than the majority. They had doubtless perceived in the domestic atmosphere something of that sultriness which foreruns a storm and sometimes precedes an earthquake, and being very much in sympathy with each other, in spite of the continual chaffing which formed the basis of their conversation, they had both begun to notice the signs of bad weather very nearly at the same time.

It must not be supposed that Mrs. Darche confided her woes to her friend, to use the current expression by which reticent people characterise the follies of others. It was not even certain at this time that she had any woes at all, but Dolly undoubtedly noticed something in her conduct which betrayed anxiety if not actual unhappiness, and Russell Vanbrugh, who, as has been observed, was intimately acquainted with many aspects of New York life, had some doubts as to the state of the Company's affairs. No one is really reticent. It would perhaps be more just to the human race as a whole to say that no two persons are capable of keeping the same secret at the same time. That is probably the reason why there is always some rumour of an approaching financial crisis, even while it is very much to the interest of all concerned to preserve a calm exterior. When a great house is about to have trouble, and even in some cases as much as two or three years before the disaster, there is a dull far-off rumble from underground, as though the foundations were trembling. There is a creaking of the timbers, an occasional and as yet unaccountable rattling of the panes,

and sometimes a very slight distortion of the lines of the edifice, all proving clearly enough that a crash is at hand. As no one believes in presentiments, divinations or the gift of prophecy in these days, it is safe to assume that some one who knows the history of the thing has betrayed the secret, or has told his wife that there is a secret to be kept. In the matter of secrets there is but one general rule. If you do not wish a fact to be known, tell no one of its existence.

Concerning the particular reasons which led Dolly Maylands and Russell Vanbrugh to exchange opinions on the subject of the Darches, it is hardly necessary to speak here. The two were very intimate and had known each other for a long time, and, possibly, there was a tendency in their acquaintance to something more like affection than friendship. The fact that Dolly did not flirt with Vanbrugh in the ordinary acceptation of that word, showed that she might possibly be in love with him. As for Vanbrugh himself, no one knew what he thought and he did not intend that any one should. He had never shown any inclination to be married, though it was said that he, like

many others, had been deeply attached to Mrs. Darche in former days; and Dolly, at least, believed that he still loved her friend in his heart, though she had neither the courage nor the bad taste to ask a question to which he might reasonably have refused an answer.

The only person in the household who seemed to have neither doubts nor uneasiness was old Simon Darche, and as it was more than likely that his intelligence had begun to fail, his own sense of security was not especially reassuring to others.

While Simon Darche was smoking his large mild cigar at the window, and while Dolly and Russell Vanbrugh were strolling by the railings of Gramercy Park, Mrs. Darche was seated before the fire in the library, and another friend of hers, who has a part to play in this little story and who, like Vanbrugh, was a lawyer, was trying to interest her in the details of a celebrated case concerning a will, and was somewhat surprised to find that he could not succeed. Harry Brett stood towards Marion Darche in very much the same friendly relation held by Vanbrugh in Dolly's existence. There was this difference, however, that Brett was

well known to have offered himself to Mrs. Darche, who had refused him upon grounds which were not clear to the social public. Brett was certainly not so rich as John, but in all other respects he seemed vastly more desirable as a husband. He was young, fresh, good-looking, good-tempered. He belonged to a good New York family, whereas the Darches were of Canadian origin. He had been quite evidently and apparently very much in love with Marion, whereas John never seemed to have looked upon her as anything but a valuable possession, to be guarded for its intrinsic worth, and to be kept in good order and condition rather than loved and cherished. Every one had said that she should have married Brett, and when she chose John every one said that she had married his money. But then it is impossible to please every one. Brett was certainly not pleased. He had gone abroad and had been absent a long time, just when he should have been working at his profession. It was supposed, not without reason, that he was profoundly disappointed, but nevertheless, when he returned he looked as fresh and cheerful as ever, was kindly received by Mrs. Darche, civilly treated

by her husband and forthwith fell into the position of especial friend to the whole family. He had made up his mind to forget all about the past, to see as much of Mrs. Darche as he could without falling in love with her a second time, as he would have called it, and he was doing his best to be happy in his own way. Within the bounds of possibility he had hitherto succeeded, and no one who wished well to him or Mrs. Darche would have desired to doubt the durability of his success. He had created an artificial happiness and spent his life in fostering the idea that it was real. Many a better man has done the same before him and many a worse may try hereafter. But the result always has been the same and in all likelihood always will be. The most refined and perfect artificiality is not nature even to him who most earnestly wishes to believe it is, and the time must inevitably come in all such lives when nature, being confronted with her image, finds it but a caricature and dashes it to pieces in wrath.

Brett's existence was indeed much more artificial than that of his old love. He had attempted to create the semblance of a new relation

on the dangerous ground whereon an older and a truer one had subsisted. She, on her part, had accepted circumstances as they had formed themselves, and did her best to get what she could out of them without any attempt to deceive herself or others. Fortunately for both she was eminently a good woman, and Brett was a gentleman in heart, as well as in deed.

And now before this tale is told, there only remains the thankless task of introducing these last two principal figures in their pen-and-ink effigies.

Of Harry Brett almost enough has been said already. His happy vitality would have lent him something of beauty even if he had possessed none at all. But he had a considerable share of good looks, in addition to his height and well-proportioned frame, his bright blue eyes, his fresh complexion, and short, curly brown hair. He too, like Vanbrugh, belonged to the American type, which has regular features, arched eyebrows, and rather deep-set eyes. The lower part of his face was strong, though the whole outline was oval rather than round or square.

Rather a conventional hero, perhaps, if he is to be a hero at all, but then, many heroes have been thought to be quite average, ordinary persons, until the knot which heroism cuts was presented to them by fate. Then people discover in them all sorts of outward signs of the inward grace that can hit so very hard. Then the phrenologists descend upon their devoted skulls and discover there the cranial localities of the vast energy, the dauntless courage, the boundless devotion to a cause, the profound logic, by which great events are brought about and directed to the end. Julius Cæsar at the age of thirty was a frivolous dandy, an amateur lawyer, and a dilettante politician, in the eyes of good society in Rome.

Harry Brett, however, is not a great hero, even in this fiction — a manly fellow with no faults of any importance and no virtues of any great magnitude, young, healthy, good-looking, courageous, troubled a little with the canker of the untrue ideal which is apt to eat the common sense out of the core of life's tree, mistaken in his attempt to create in himself an artificial

satisfaction in the friendship of the woman he had loved and was in danger of loving still, gifted with the clear sight which must sooner or later see through his self-made illusion, and possessed of more than the average share of readiness in speech and action — a contrast, in this respect, to Vanbrugh. The latter, from having too comprehensive a view of things, was often slow in reaching a decision. Brett was more like Mrs. Darche herself in respect of quick judgment and self-reliance at first sight, if such a novel expression is permissible.

As Marion sat before the fire apparently studying its condition and meditating a descent upon it, after the manner of her kind, she was not paying much attention to Brett's interesting story about the great lawyer who had drawn up his own will so that hardly a clause of it had turned out to be legal, and Brett himself was more absorbed in watching her than in telling the complicated tale. She was generally admitted to be handsome. Her enemies said that she had green eyes and yellow hair, which was apparently true, but they also said that she dyed the one

and improved the other with painting, which was false. Her hair was naturally as fair as yellow gold, of an even colour throughout, and the shadows beneath her eyes and the dark eyebrows, which were sources of so much envy and malice, were natural and not done with little coloured sticks of greasy crayon kept in tubes made to look like silver pencil-cases, and generally concealed beneath the lace of the toilet table or in the toe of a satin slipper.

Marion Darche was handsome and looked strong, though there was rarely much colour in her face. She did not flush easily. Women who do, often have an irritable heart, as the doctors call the thing, and though their affections may be stable their circulation is erratic. They suffer agonies of shyness in youth and considerable annoyance in maturer years from the consciousness that the blood is forever surging in their cheeks at the most inopportune moment; and the more they think of it, the more they blush, which does not mend matters and often betrays secrets. Three-fourths of the shyness one sees in the world is the result of an irritable heart.

Marion Darche's circulation was normal, and she was not shy.

Like many strong persons, she was gentle, naturally cheerful and generally ready to help any one who needed assistance. She had an admirably even temper — a matter, like physical courage, which depends largely upon the action of the heart and the natural quality of the nerves — and under all ordinary circumstances she ate and slept like other people. She did not look at all like Helen or Clytemnestra, and her disposition was not in the least revengeful — a quiet, tall, fair young woman, whose clear eyes looked every one calmly in the face and whose strong white hands touched things delicately but could hold firmly when she chose; carrying herself straight through a crowd, as she bore herself upright through life. Those who knew her face best admired especially her mouth and the small, well-cut, advancing chin, which seemed made to meet difficulties as a swimmer's divides the water. In figure, as in face, too, she was strong, the undulating curves were those of elasticity and energy, rather than of indolence and repose.

As Harry Brett talked and watched her he honestly tried not to wish that she might have been his wife, and when his resolution broke down he conscientiously talked on and did his best to interest himself in his own conversation. The effort was familiar to him of old, and had so often ended in failure that he was glad when the distant tinkle of the door bell announced the coming of a third person. John rarely lunched at home and old Mr. Darche was never summoned until the meal was served. Brett broke off in the middle of his story and laughed a little.

"I believe you have not understood a word of what I have been telling you," he said.

Mrs. Darche looked up suddenly, abandoned the study of the burning logs and leaned back in her chair before she answered. Then she looked at him quietly and smiled, not even attempting to deny the imputation.

"It is very rude of me, is it not? You must forgive me, to-day. I am very much preoccupied."

"You often are, nowadays," answered Brett,

with a short, manlike sigh, which might have passed for a sniff of dissatisfaction.

"I know I am. I am sorry."

The door opened and Dolly Maylands entered the room, followed closely by Russell Vanbrugh.

CHAPTER III.

SIMON DARCHE was undoubtedly a bore. Since bores exist and there is no other name for them, the strong word has some right to pass into the English language. The old gentleman belonged to the unconscious and self-complacent variety of the species, which is, on the whole, less unbearable than certain others. Generally speaking, it is true that people who are easily bored are bores themselves, but there are many very genuine and intolerable bores who go through life rejoicing and convinced that their conversation is a blessing and their advice a treasure to those who get it.

Bores always have one or two friends. Simon Darche had found one in his daughter-in-law and he availed himself of her friendship to the utmost, so that it was amazing to see how much she could bear, for she was as constantly bored by him as other people, and appeared, indeed, to

be his favourite victim. But no one had ever heard her complain. Day after day she listened to his talk, smiled at his old stories, read to him, and seemed rather to seek his society than to avoid it. She was never apparently tired of hearing about John's childhood and youth and she received the old man's often repeated confidences concerning his own life with an ever-renewed expression of sympathy.

"I simply could not stand it for a day!" exclaimed Dolly occasionally. "Why, he is worse than my school children!"

Miss Maylands could not put the case more strongly. Perhaps no one else could.

"I like him," answered Mrs. Darche. "I know he is a bore. But then, I suppose I am a bore myself."

"Oh, Marion!" And Dolly laughed.

That was generally the end of the conversation. But Dolly, who was by no means altogether frivolous and had a soul, and bestowed now and then considerable attention upon its religious toilet, so to say — Dolly fancied that Papa Darche, as she called him, took the place of a baby in her friend's heart. Rather a permanent and antique

baby, Dolly thought, but better than nothing for a woman who felt that she must love and take care of something helpless. She herself did not care for that sort of thing. The maternal instinct developed itself in another direction and she taught children in a kindergarten. The stupid ones tired her, as she expressed it, but then her soul came to the rescue and did its best, which was not bad. Dolly was a good girl, though she had too many "purposes" in life.

Not many minutes after she and Vanbrugh had entered the room on the morning described in the previous chapters, luncheon was announced.

"Tell Mr. Darche that luncheon is ready, Stubbs," said Marion, and Stubbs, gray-haired, portly, rosy-cheeked and respectful, disappeared to summon the old gentleman.

Vanbrugh looked at Brett and both smiled, hardly knowing why. Neither of them had ever lunched at the house without hearing the same order given by the hostess. People often smile foolishly at familiar things, merely because they are familiar. Dolly and Mrs. Darche had sat down together and the two men stood side by

side near a table on which a number of reviews and periodicals were neatly arranged in order. Brett idly took up one of them and held it in his hand.

"By the bye," he said, "to-day is not Sunday. You are not ill, I hope."

"Only lazy," answered Vanbrugh.

"So am I," answered Brett after a moment's pause.

There they stood in silence, apathetically glancing at the two ladies, at the fire and at the window, as two men who know each other very well are apt to do when they are waiting for luncheon. Brett chanced to look down at the magazine he held in his hand. It was bound in white paper and the back of the cover was occupied by a huge advertisement in large letters. The white margin around it was filled with calculations made in blue and red pencil, with occasional marks in green. Mechanically Brett's eyes followed the calculations. The same figure, a high one, recurred in many places, and any one with a child's knowledge of arithmetic could have seen that there was a constant attempt to make

up another sum corresponding to it, — an attempt which seemed always to have failed. Brett remembered that Darche carried a pencil-case with leads of three colours in it, and he tossed the magazine upon the table as though he realised that he had been prying into another person's business. He glanced at Mrs. Darche who was still talking with Dolly, and a moment later he took up the magazine again and cautiously tore off the back of the cover, crumpled it in his hands, approached the fire and tossed it into the flames. Mrs. Darche looked up quickly.

"What is that?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing," answered Brett, "only a bit of paper."

Just then Simon Darche entered the room and all rose to go in to luncheon together.

The old gentleman shook hands with Dolly and with both the men, looking keenly into their faces, but mentioning no names. He was cheerful and ruddy, and a stranger might have expected his conversation to be enlivening. In this however, he would have been egregiously disappointed.

"What have you been doing this morning?" asked Mrs. Darche turning to him.

She had asked the question every day for years, whenever she had lunched at home.

"Very busy, very busy," answered Mr. Darche.

His hands did not tremble as he unfolded his napkin, but he seemed to bestow an extraordinary amount of attention on the exact position of the glasses before him, pushing them a little forwards and backwards and glancing at them critically until he was quite satisfied.

"Busy, of course," he said and looked cheerfully round the table. "There is no real happiness except in hard work. If I could only make you understand that, Marion, you would be much happier. Early to bed and early to rise."

"Makes a man stupid and closes his eyes," observed Brett, finishing the proverb in its modern form.

"What, what? What doggerel is that?"

"Did you never hear that?" asked Dolly, laughing. "It is from an unwritten and unpublished book — modern proverbs."

Simon Darche shook his head and smiled feebly.

"Dear me, dear me, I thought you were in earnest," he said.

"So he is," said Dolly. "We may have to get up at dawn sometimes, but we are far too much in earnest to go to bed early."

This was evidently beyond Simon Darche's comprehension and he relapsed into silence and the consumption of oysters. Mrs. Darche glanced reproachfully at Dolly as though to tell her that she should not chaff the old gentleman, and Vanbrugh came to the rescue.

"Do you often get up at dawn, Miss Maylands?" he inquired.

"Do I look as if I did?" retorted the young lady.

"How in the world should I know," asked Vanbrugh. "Do I look as though I associated with people who got up at dawn?"

Brett laughed.

"It always amuses me to hear you and Vanbrugh talk, Miss Maylands."

"Does it, I am so glad," said Dolly.

"Yes, you seem perfectly incapable of saying one word to each other without chaffing."

Old Mr. Darche had finished his oysters.

"Yes — yes," he observed. "A pair of chaffinches."

A moment of silence followed this appalling pun. Then Mrs. Darche laughed a little nervously, and Brett, who wished to help her, followed her example. The old gentleman himself seemed delighted with his own wit.

"We are beginning well," said Dolly. "Puns and proverbs with the oysters. What shall we get with the fruit?"

Vanbrugh was inclined to suggest that the dessert would probably find them in an idiot asylum, but he wisely abstained from words and tried to turn the conversation into a definite channel.

"Did you read that book I sent you, Mrs. Darche?" he asked.

"Yes," answered the latter, "I began to read it to my father-in-law but he did not care for it, so I am going on with it alone."

"What book was that, my dear?" inquired the old gentleman.

Mrs. Darche named a recent foreign novel which had been translated.

"Oh, that thing!" exclaimed her father-in-law. "Why, it is all about Frenchmen and tea parties! Very dull. Very dull. But then a busy man like myself has very little time for such nonsense. Mr. Trehearne, I suppose I could not give you any idea of the amount of work I have to do."

He looked at Vanbrugh as he spoke.

"Trehearne?" Brett repeated the name in a low voice, looking at Mrs. Darche.

"I know you are one of the busiest men alive," said Vanbrugh quietly and without betraying the slightest astonishment.

"I should think so," said Simon Darche, "and I am very glad I am. Nothing keeps a man busy like being successful. And I may fairly say that I have been very successful — thanks to John, well — I suppose I may take a little credit to myself."

"Indeed you may," said Mrs. Darche readily.

Every one thought it wise and proper to join in a little murmur of approval, but Dolly was curious to see what the old gentleman would say next. She wondered whether his taking Vanbrugh for old Mr. Trehearne, who had been a

friend of his youth and who had been dead some years, was the first sign of mental decay. From Mrs. Darche's calm manner she inferred that this was not the first time he had done something of the kind, and her mind went back quickly to her conversation with Vanbrugh that morning in Gramercy Park. Simon Darche was still talking.

"The interests of the Company are becoming positively gigantic, and there seems to be no end to the fresh issues that are possible, though none of them have been brought to me to sign yet."

Brett looked quickly at Vanbrugh, but the latter was imperturbable.

At that moment the door opened and John Darche entered the dining-room. His face was a little paler than usual and he seemed tired. Mrs. Darche looked at him in surprise and her father-in-law smiled as he always did when he saw his son. Every one present said something more or less incomprehensible by way of greeting. The new-comer shook hands with Dolly Maylands, nodded to the rest and sat down in the place which was always reserved for him opposite his wife.

"I had nothing particular to do, so I came home to luncheon," he said, by way of explaining his unexpected appearance.

"I am so glad."

"Nothing particular to do!" exclaimed the old gentleman momentarily surprised into his senses.

"Nothing requiring my presence," answered John Darche gravely. "I was down town early this morning and cleared off everything. I shall ride this afternoon."

"Quite right, quite right, my boy!" put in Simon Darche. "You should take care of your health. You have been doing too much of late. I suppose," he added, looking about at the others, "that there is not a man alive who has my son's power of work."

"You do work dreadfully hard, John," said Mrs. Darche.

"But then," said her father-in-law with evident pride, "John leads such a regular life. He does not drink, he does not smoke, he does not sit up late at night — altogether, I must say that he takes better care of himself than I ever did. And that

is the reason," continued the old gentleman with increasing animation, "that he has accomplished so much. If some of you young men would follow his example you would do a great deal more in the world. Regular hours, regular meals, no cocktails — oh I daresay if I had never smoked a cigar in my life I should be good for another fifty years. John will live to be a hundred."

"Let us hope so," said Vanbrugh blandly.

"What is this particular disagreeable thing you have given me to eat?" inquired John looking at his wife.

Mrs. Darche looked up in surprise. The remark was quite in keeping with his usual manner, but it was very unlike him to notice anything that was put before him.

"I believe it is a shad," she said.

"Yes, I suppose it is," answered John. "The thing has bones in it. Give me something else, Stubbs."

He got something else to eat and relapsed into silence. The remainder of the luncheon was not gay, for his coming had chilled even Dolly's good spirits. Brett and Vanbrugh did their best to

sustain the conversation, but the latter felt more certain than ever that something serious was the matter. Old Simon Darche meandered on, interspersing his praise of his son and his boasts of the prosperity of the Company with stale proverbs and atrocious puns. Almost as soon as the meal was over the few guests departed with that unpleasant sense of unsatisfied moral appetite which people have when they have expected to enjoy being together and have been disappointed.

When every one was gone John Darche remained in the drawing-room with his wife. He sat down in his chair like a man over-tired with hard work, and something like a sigh escaped him. Mrs. Darche pushed a small table to his side, laid his papers upon it and sat down opposite him. A long silence followed. From time to time she looked up at her husband as though she expected him to say something, but he did not open his lips, though he often stared at her for several minutes together. His unwinking blue eyes faced the light as he looked at her, and their expression was disagreeable to her, so that she lowered her own rather than encounter it.

"Are things growing worse, John?" at last she asked him.

"Worse? What do you mean?"

"You told me some time ago that you were anxious. I thought that perhaps you might be in some trouble."

John did not answer at once but looked at her as though he did not see her, took up a paper and glanced absently over the columns of advertisements.

"Oh no," he said at last, as though her question had annoyed him. "There is nothing wrong, nothing whatever." Again a silence followed. Mrs. Darche went to her writing-table and began to write a note. John did not move.

"Marion," said he at last, "has any one been talking to you about my affairs?"

"No indeed," answered Mrs. Darche in evident surprise at the question, but with such ready frankness that he could not doubt her.

"No," he repeated. "I see that no one has. I only asked because people are always so ready to talk about what they cannot understand, and are generally so perfectly certain about what they do

not know. I thought Dolly Maylands might have been chattering."

"Dolly does not talk about you, John."

"Oh! I wonder why not. Does she dislike me especially — I mean more than most people — more than you do, for instance?"

"John!"

"My dear, do not imagine that it grieves me, though it certainly does not make life more agreeable to be disliked. On the whole, I hardly know which I prefer — my father's perpetual outspoken praise, or your dutiful and wifely hatred."

"Why do you talk like that?"

Mrs. Darche did not leave her writing-table, but turned in her chair and faced him, still holding her pen.

"I fancy there is some truth in what I say," he answered calmly. "Of course you know that you made a mistake when you married me. You were never in love with me — and you did not marry me for my money."

He laughed rather harshly.

"No, I did not marry you for your money."

"Of course not. You have some of your own — enough — "

"And to spare, if you needed it, John."

"You are very kind, my dear," replied Darche with a scarcely perceptible touch of contempt in his tone. "I shall survive without borrowing money of my wife."

"I hope you may never need to borrow of any one," said Marion.

She turned to the table again and began arranging a few scattered notes and papers to conceal her annoyance at his tone, hoping that her inoffensive answer might soon have the effect of sending him away, as was usually the case. But Darche was not quite in his ordinary state. He was tired, irritable, and greedy for opposition, as men are whose nerves are overwrought and who do not realise the fact, because they are not used to it, and it is altogether new to them.

"I am tired of 'yea, yea.' Change the conversation, please, and say 'nay, nay.' It would make a little variety."

"Do you object to my agreeing with you? I am sorry. It is not always easy to guess what

you would like. I am quite ready to give up trying, if you say so. We can easily arrange our lives differently, if you prefer it."

"How do you mean?"

"We might separate, for instance," suggested Mrs. Darche.

John was surprised. He had sometimes wondered whether it were not altogether impossible to irritate his wife's calm temper to some open expression of anger. He had almost succeeded, but he by no means liked the form of retort she had chosen. A separation would not have suited him at all, for in his character the love of his possessions was strong, and he looked upon his wife as an important item in the inventory of his personal property. He hesitated a moment before he answered.

"Of course we might separate, but I do not intend that we should — if I can help it," he added, as though an afterthought had occurred to him.

"You are not doing your best to prevent it," answered Mrs. Darche.

"Oh! — what are my sins? Are you jealous? This begins to interest me."

"No, I am not jealous, you have never given me any cause to be."

"You think that incompatibility of temper would be sufficient ground, then?"

"For a temporary separation — yes."

"Ah — it is to be only temporary? How good you are!"

"It can be permanent, if you like."

"I have already told you that I have no idea of separating. I cannot imagine why you go back to it as you do."

"You drive me back to it.'

"You are suddenly developing a temper. This is delightful."

Mrs. Darche made no answer, but occupied herself with her papers in silence. She could hardly account for the humour in which she was answering her husband, seeing that for years she had listened to his disagreeable and brutal sayings without retort. It is impossible to foresee the precise moment at which the worm will turn, the beast refuse its load, and the human heart revolt. Sometimes it never comes at all, and then we call the sufferer a coward. After a pause

which lasted several minutes, John renewed the attack.

"I am sorry you will not quarrel any more, it was so refreshing," he said.

"I do not like quarrelling," answered Marion, without looking up. "What good can it do?"

"You are always wanting to do good! Life without contrasts is very insipid."

Mrs. Darche rose from her seat and came and stood by the fireplace.

"John," she said, "something has happened. You are not like yourself. If I can be of any use to you, tell me the truth and I will do all I can. If not, go and ride as you said you would. The fresh air will rest you."

"You are a good creature, my dear," said Darche looking at her curiously.

"I do not know whether you mean to be flattering, or whether you wish to go on with this idle bickering over words — you know that I do not like to be called a good creature, like the washerwoman or the cook. Yes — I know — I am angry just now. Never mind, my advice is good. Either go out at once, or tell me just what is the

matter and let me do the best I can to help you."

"There is nothing to tell, my dear."

"Then go out, or go and talk to your father — or stay here, and I will go away."

"Anything rather than stay together," suggested Darche.

"Yes — anything rather than that. I daresay it is my fault, and I am quite willing to bear all the blame, but if we are together in the same room much longer we shall do something which we shall regret — at least I shall. I am sure of it."

"That would be very unfortunate," said Darche, rising, with a short laugh. "Our life has been so exceptionally peaceful since we were married!"

"I think it has," answered Marion, calmly, "considering your character and mine. On the whole we have kept the peace very well. It has certainly not been what I expected and hoped that it might be, but it has not been so unhappy as that of many people I know. We both made a mistake, perhaps, but others have made worse ones. You ask why I married you. I believe that I loved you. But I might ask you the same question."

"You would get very much the same answer."

"Oh no — you never loved me. I cannot even say that you have changed much in five years, since our honeymoon. You did not encourage my illusions very long."

"No. Why should I?"

"I daresay you were right. I daresay that it has been best so. The longer one has loved a thing, the harder it is to part from it. I loved my illusions. As for you — "

"As for me, I loved you, as I understand love," said Darche walking up and down the room with his hands in his pockets. "And, what is more, as I understand love, I love you still."

"Love cannot be a very serious matter with you, then," answered Marion, turning from him to the fire and pushing back a great log with her foot.

"You are mistaken," returned Darche. "Love is a serious matter, but not half so serious as young girls are inclined to believe. Is it not a matter of prime importance to select carefully the woman who is to sit opposite to one at table for a lifetime, and whose voice one must hear

every day for forty years or so? Of course it is serious. It is like selecting the president of a company — only that you cannot turn him out and choose another when you are not pleased with him. Love is not a wild, insane longing to be impossibly dramatic at every hour of the day. Love is natural selection. Darwin says so. Now a sensible man of business like me, naturally selects a sensible woman like you to be the mistress of his household. That is all it comes to, in the end. There is no essential difference between a man's feeling for the woman he loves and his feeling for anything else he wants."

"And I fill the situation admirably. Is that what you mean?" inquired Marion with some scorn.

"If you choose to put it in that way."

"And that is what you call being loved?"

"Yes — being wanted. It comes to that. All the rest is illusion — dream-stuff, humbug, 'fake' if you do not object to Bowery slang."

"Are you going out?" asked Mrs. Darche, losing patience altogether.

"No. But I am going upstairs to see the old gentleman. It is almost the same."

He went towards the door and his hand was on the handle of the lock when she called him back.

"John —" there was hesitation in her voice.

"Well? What is the matter?" He came back a few steps and stood near her.

"John, did you never care for me in any other way — in any better way — from the heart? You used to say that you did."

"Did I? I have forgotten. One always supposes that young girls naturally expect one to talk a lot of nonsense, and that one has no choice unless one does — so one makes the best of it. I remember that it was a bore to make phrases so I probably made them. Anything else you would like to ask?"

"No — thanks. I would rather be alone."

John Darche left the room and Marion returned to her writing-table as though nothing had been said, intending to write her notes as usual. And indeed, she began, and the pen ran easily across the paper for a few moments.

Then on a sudden, her lip quivered, she wrote one more word, the pen fell from her fingers, and

bowing her head upon the edge of the table she let the short, sharp sobs break out as they would.

She was a very lonely woman on that winter's afternoon, and the tension she had kept on herself had been too great to bear any longer.

CHAPTER IV.

In spite of her husband's denial, Marion Darche was convinced that he was in difficulties, though she could not understand how such a point could have been reached in the affairs of the Company, which had always been considered so solid, and which had the reputation of being managed so well. It was natural, when matters reached a crisis, that none of her acquaintances should speak to her of her husband's troubles, and many said that Mrs. Darche was a brave woman to face the world as she did when her husband was in all likelihood already ruined and was openly accused on all sides of something very like swindling. But as a matter of fact she was in complete ignorance of all this. John Darche laughed scornfully when she repeated her question, and she had never even thought of asking the old gentleman any questions. She was too proud to speak of her troubles to Vanbrugh or Brett; and

Dolly, foreseeing real trouble, thought it best to hide from her friend the fears she entertained. As sometimes happens in such cases, matters had gone very far without Mrs. Darche's knowledge. The Company was in hands of a receiver and an inquiry into the conduct of Simon and John Darche was being pushed forward with the utmost energy by the frightened holders of the bonds and shares, while Marion was dining and dancing through the winter season as usual. The Darches were accused of having issued an enormous amount of stock without proper authority; but there were many who said that Simon Darche was innocent of the trick, and that John had manufactured bogus certificates. Others again maintained that Simon Darche was in his dotage and signed whatever was put before him by his son, without attempting to understand the obligations to which he committed himself.

Meanwhile John's position became desperate, though he himself did not believe it to be so utterly hopeless as it really was. Since this is the story of Marion Darche and not of her husband, it is unnecessary to enter into the

financial details of the latter's ruin. It is enough to say that for personal ends he had made use of the Company's funds in order to get into his own control a line of railroad by which a large part of the Company's produce was transported, with the intention of subsequently forcing the Company to buy the road of him on his own terms, as soon as he should have disposed by stealth of his interest in the manufacture. Had the scheme succeeded he should have realised a great fortune by the transaction, and it is doubtful whether anything could have been proved against him after the event. Unfortunately for him, he had come into collision with a powerful syndicate of which he had not suspected the existence until he had gone so far that either to go on or to retire must be almost certain ruin and exposure. The existence of this syndicate had dawned upon him on the day described in the preceding chapters, and the state of mind in which he found himself was amply accounted for by the discovery he had made.

As time went on during the following weeks, and he became more and more hopelessly in-

volved, his appearance and his manner changed for the worse. He grew haggard and thin, and his short speeches to his wife lacked even that poor element of wit which is brutality's last hold upon good manners. With his father, however, he maintained his usual behaviour, by a desperate effort. He could not afford to allow the whole fabric of the old gentleman's illusions about him to perish, so long as Simon Darche's hand and name could still be useful. It is but just to admit, too, that he felt a sort of cynical, pitying attachment to his father — the affection which a spoiled child bestows upon an over-indulgent parent, which is strongly tinged with the vanity excited by a long course of unstinted and indiscriminating praise.

If Marion Darche's own fortune had been invested in the Company of which her husband was treasurer, she must have been made aware of the condition of things long before the final day of reckoning came. But her property had been left her in the form of real estate, and the surplus had been invested in such bonds and mortgages as had been considered absolutely safe

by Harry Brett's father, who had originally been her guardian, and, after his death, by Harry Brett himself, who was now her legal adviser, and managed her business for her. The house in Lexington Avenue was her property. After her marriage she had persuaded her husband to live in it rather than in the somewhat pretentious and highly inconvenient mansion erected on Fifth Avenue by Simon Darche in the early days of his great success, which was decorated within, and to some extent without, according to the doubtful taste of the late Mrs. Simon Darche. Vanbrugh compared it to an "inflamed Pullman car."

Enough has been said to show how at the time, the Darches were on the verge of utter ruin, and how Marion Darche was financially independent. Meanwhile the old gentleman's mind was failing fast, a fact which was so apparent that Marion was not at all surprised when her husband told her that there was to be a consultation of doctors to inquire into the condition of Simon Darche, with a view to deciding whether he was fit to remain, even nominally,

at the head of the Company or not. As a matter of fact, the consultation had become a legal necessity, enforced by the committee that was examining the Company's affairs.

John Darche was making a desperate fight of it, sacrificing everything upon which he could lay his hands in order to buy in the fraudulent certificates of stock. He was constantly in want of money, and seized every opportunity of realising a few thousands which presented itself, even descending to gambling in the stock market in the hope of picking up more cash. He was unlucky, of course, and margin after margin disappeared and was swallowed up. From time to time he made something by his speculations — just enough to revive his shrinking hopes, and to whet his eagerness, already sharpened by extremest anxiety. He did not think of escaping from the country, however. In the first place, if he disappeared at this juncture, he must be a beggar or dependent on his wife's charity. Secondly, he could not realise that the end was so near and that the game was played out to the last card. Still he

struggled on frantically, hoping for a turn of the market, for a windfall out of the unknown, for a wave of luck, whereby a great sum being suddenly thrown into his hands he should be able to cover up the traces of his misdeeds and begin life afresh.

Marion was as brave as ever, but she got even more credit for her courage than she really deserved. She knew at this time that the trouble was great, but she had no idea that it was altogether past mending, and she had not renewed the offer of help she had made to her husband when she had first noticed his distress. In the meantime, she devoted herself to the care of old Simon Darche. She read aloud to him in the morning, though she was quite sure that he rarely followed a single sentence to the end. She drove with him in the afternoon and listened patiently to his rambling comments on men and things. His inability to recognise many of the persons who had been most familiar to him in the earlier part of his life was becoming very apparent, and the constant mistakes he made rendered it advisable to keep him out of inter-

course with any but the members of his own family. As has been said, Mrs. Darche had not as yet made any change in her social existence, but Dolly Maylands, who knew more of the true state of affairs than her friend, came to see her every day and grew anxious in the anticipation of the inevitable disaster. Her fresh face grew a little paler and showed traces of nervousness. She felt perhaps as men do who lead a life of constant danger. She slept as well and became almost abnormally active, seizing feverishly upon everything and every subject which could help to occupy her time.

"You work too hard, Dolly," said Mrs. Darche one morning as they were seated together in the library. "You will wear yourself out. You have danced all night, and now you mean to spend your day in slaving at your charities."

Dolly laughed a little as she went on cutting the pages of the magazine she held. This was a thing Mrs. Darche especially disliked doing, and Dolly had long ago taken upon herself the responsibility of cutting all new books and reviews which entered the house.

"Oh I love to burn the candle at both ends," she answered.

"No doubt you do, my dear. We have all liked to do that at one time or another. But at this rate you will light your candle in the middle, too."

"You cannot light a candle in the middle," said Dolly with great decision.

"If anybody could, you could," said Marion, watching her as she had often done of late and wondering if any change had come into the young girl's life. "Seriously, my dear, I am anxious about you. I wish you would take care of yourself, or get married, or something."

"If you will tell me what that 'something' is I will get it at once," said Dolly, with a smile that had a tinge of sadness in it. "I ask nothing better."

"Oh anything!" exclaimed Mrs. Darche. "Get nervous prostration or anything that is thoroughly fashionable and gives no trouble, and then go somewhere and rest for a month."

"My dear child," cried Dolly with a laugh, "I cannot think of being so old-fashioned as to have

nervous prostration. Let me see. I might be astigmatic. That seems to be the proper thing nowadays. Then I could wear glasses and look the character of the school-ma'am. Then I could say I could not dance because I could not see, because of course I could not dance in spectacles. But for the matter of that, my dear, you need not lecture me. You are as bad as I am, and much worse — yours is a much harder life than mine."

Just as Dolly was about to draw a comparison between her own existence and her friend's, the door opened and Stubbs entered the room bearing a dozen enormous roses, of the kind known as American beauties. Dolly, who had a passion for flowers, sprang up, and seized upon them with an exclamation of delight.

"What beauties! What perfect beauties!" she said. "You lucky creature! Who in the world sends you such things?"

Mrs. Darche had risen from her seat and had buried her face in the thick blossoms while Dolly held them.

"I am sure I do not know," she said.

"Oh Marion!" answered Dolly, smiling. "Innocence always was your strong point, and what a strong point it is. I wish people would send me flowers like these."

"I have no doubt they do, my dear. Do not pretend they do not. Come and help me arrange them instead of talking nonsense. Even if it were true that my life is harder than yours—I do not know why—you see there are alleviations."

Dolly did not answer at once. She was wondering just how much her friend knew of the actual state of things, and she was surprised to feel a little touch of pain when she contrasted the truth, so far as she knew it, with the negatively blissful ignorance in which Mrs. Darche's nearest and best friends were doing their best to keep her.

"Of course there are alleviations in your life, just as there are in mine," she said at last, "changes, contrasts and all that sort of thing. My kindergarten alleviates my dancing and my cotillons vary the dulness of my school teaching."

She paused and continued to arrange the flowers in silence, looking back now and then and glancing

at them. Mrs. Darche did not speak, but watched her idly, taking a certain artistic pleasure in the fitness of the details which made up the little picture before her.

"But I would not lead your life for anything in the world," added Dolly at last with great decision.

"Oh, nonsense, Dolly!"

"Are you happy, Marion?" asked Dolly, suddenly growing very grave.

"Happy?" repeated Mrs. Darche, a little surprised by the sudden question. "Yes, why not? What do you mean by happy?"

"What everybody means, I suppose."

"What is that?"

"Why, wanting things and getting them, of course — wanting a ten cent thing a dollar's worth, and having it."

"What a definition!" exclaimed Mrs. Darche. "But I really do believe you enjoy your life."

"Though it would bore you to extinction."

"Possibly. The alternate wild attacks of teaching and flirting to which you are subject would probably not agree with me."

"Perhaps you could do either, but not both at the same time."

"I suppose I could teach if I knew anything," said Mrs. Darche thoughtfully. "But I do not," she added with conviction.

"And I have no doubt you could flirt if you loved anybody. It is a pity you do not."

"Oh, my flirting days are over," answered Marion laughing. "You seem to forget that I am married."

"Do you not forget it sometimes?" asked Dolly, laughing, but with less genuine mirth.

"Do not be silly!" exclaimed Marion with a slight shade of annoyance. She had been helping Dolly with the roses, all of which, with the exception of two, were now arranged in a vase.

"These will not go in," she said, holding up the remaining flowers. "You might stick them into that little silver cup."

"To represent you—and the other man. A red and a white rose. Is that it?"

"Or you and me," suggested Mrs. Darche in perfect innocence. "Why not?"

"Tell me," said Dolly, when they had finished, "who is he?"

"Why, Russell Vanbrugh, of course."

"Oh!" exclaimed Dolly, turning her head away. "Why of course?"

"Oh, because —"

"Why not Harry Brett?" asked Dolly, with the merciless insistence peculiar to very young people.

In all probability, if no interruption had occurred, the conversation of that morning would have taken a more confidential turn than usual, and poor Dolly might then and there have satisfied her curiosity in regard to the relations between Marion and Russell Vanbrugh.

It would be more correct, perhaps, to use a word of less definite meaning than relation. Dolly suspected indeed that Vanbrugh loved Mrs. Darche in his own quiet and undemonstrative fashion, and that this was the secret of his celibacy. She believed it possible, too, that her friend might be more deeply attached to Vanbrugh than she was willing to acknowledge even in her own heart. But she was absolutely convinced that whatever the two might feel for one another their feelings would remain for ever a secret. She had gone further than usual

in asking Marion whether she were happy, and whether she had not at some time or another almost forgotten that she was married at all. And Marion had not resented the words. Dolly felt that she was on the very point of getting at the truth, and was hoping that she might be left alone half-an-hour longer with her friend, when the door opened and Simon Darche entered the room. At the sight of the two young women his pink silk face lighted up with a bright smile. He rubbed his hands, and the vague expression of his old blue eyes gave place to a look of recognition, imaginary, it is true, but evidently a source of pleasure to himself.

"Good morning, my dear," he said briskly, taking Marion's hand in both of his and pressing it affectionately. "Good morning, Mrs. Chilton," he added, smiling at Dolly.

"Dolly Maylands," suggested Marion in an undertone.

"Dolly? Dolly?" repeated the old man. "Yes, yes — what did you say? What did you say, Marion? Dolly Chilton? Silly child. Dolly Chilton has been dead these twenty years."

"What does he mean?" asked Dolly in a whisper. Simon Darche turned upon her rather suddenly.

"Oh yes, I remember," he said. "You are the little girl who used to talk about Darwin, and the soul, and monkeys without tails, and steam engines, when you were seven years old. Why, my dear child, I know you very well indeed. How long have you been married?"

"I am not married," answered the young girl, suppressing a smile.

"Why not?" inquired Mr. Darche with startling directness. "But then — oh, yes! I am very sorry, my dear. I did not mean to allude to it. I went to poor Chilton's funeral."

Just then, Stubbs, the butler, entered again, bearing this time a note for Mrs. Darche. While she glanced at the contents he waited near the door in obedience to a gesture from her. Old Mr. Darche immediately went up to him, and with hearty cordiality seized and shook his reluctant hand.

"Happy to meet you, old fellow!" he cried. "That is all right. Now just sit down here and

we will go through the question in five minutes."

"Beg pardon, sir," said the impassive butler. It was not the first time that his master had taken him for an old friend.

"Eh, what!" cried Simon Darche. "Calling me 'sir'? Did you come here to quarrel with me, old man? Oh, I see! You are laughing. Well come along. This business will not keep. The ladies will not mind if we go to work, I daresay."

And forthwith he dragged Stubbs to a table and forced him into a chair, talking to him all the time. Dolly was startled and grasped Marion's arm.

"What is it?" she asked under her breath. "Oh, Marion, what is it? Is he quite mad?"

Mrs. Darche answered her only by a warning look, and then, turning away, seemed to hesitate a moment. Stubbs was suffering acutely, submitting to sit on the edge of the chair to which his master had pushed him, merely because no means of escape suggested itself to his mechanical intelligence.

"Why can you not sit down comfortably?"

asked Mr. Darche, with a show of temper. "You are not in a hurry, I know. Oh I see, you are cold. Well, warm yourself. Cold morning. It will be warm enough in Wall Street to-morrow, if we put this thing through. Now just let me explain the position to you. I tell you we are stronger than anybody thinks. Yes sir. I do not see any limit to what we may do."

Marion took a flower from one of the vases and went up to the old gentleman.

"Just let me put this rose in your coat, before you go to work."

Mr. Darche turned towards her as she spoke, and his attention was diverted. With a serio-comic expression of devout thankfulness, Stubbs rose and noiselessly glided from the room.

"Thank you, thank you," said the old gentleman, and as he bent to smell the blossom, his head dropped forward rather helplessly. "I was always fond of flowers."

The note which Stubbs had brought conveyed the information that the three doctors who were to examine old Mr. Darche with a view of

ascertaining whether he could properly be held responsible for his actions, would come in half an hour. It was now necessary to prepare him for the visit, and Marion had not decided upon any plan.

It was evidently out of the question to startle him by letting him suspect the truth, or even by telling him that his visitors belonged to the medical profession. Mrs. Darche wished that she might have the chance of consulting Dolly alone for a moment before the doctors came, but this seemed equally impossible. She silently handed the note to her friend to read and began talking to the old gentleman again. He answered at random almost everything she said. It was clear that he was growing rapidly worse and that his state was changing from day to day. Marion, of course, did not know that the medical examination was to be held by order of the committee conducting the inquiry into the Company's affairs. Her husband had simply told her what she already knew, namely, that his father was no longer able to attend to business and that the fact must

be recognised and a new president elected. It would be quite possible, he thought, to leave the old gentleman in the illusion that he still enjoyed his position and exercised his functions. There could be no harm in that. To tell him the truth might inflict such a shock upon his faculties as would hasten their complete collapse, and might even bring about a fatal result. He had impressed upon her the necessity of using the utmost tact on the occasion of the doctors' visit, but had refused to be present himself, arguing, perhaps rightly, that his appearance could be of no use, but that it might, on the contrary, tend to complicate a situation already difficult enough.

The only course that suggested itself to Mrs. Darche's imagination, was to represent the three doctors as men of business who came to consult her father-in-law upon an important matter. At the first mention of business, the old gentleman's expression changed and his manner became more animated.

"Eh, business?" he cried. "Oh yes. Never refuse to see a man on business. Where are they?

Good morning, Mrs. Chilton. I am sorry I cannot stay, but I have some important business to attend to."

He insisted upon going to his study immediately in order to be ready to receive his visitors.

"Wait for me, Dolly," said Marion, as she followed him.

Dolly nodded and sat down in her own place by the fireplace, taking up the magazine she had begun to cut and thoughtfully resuming her occupation. Under ordinary circumstances she would perhaps have gone away to occupy herself during the morning in some of the many matters which made her life so full. But her instinct told her that there was trouble in the air to-day, and that the affairs of the Darches were rapidly coming to a crisis. She liked difficulties, as she liked everything which needed energy and quickness of decision, and her attachment to her friend would alone have kept her on the scene of danger.

Marion did not return immediately, and Dolly supposed that she had determined to stay with the old gentleman until the doctors came. It was rather pleasant to sit by the fire and think, and

wonder, and fill out the incidents of the drama which seemed about to be enacted in the house. Dolly realised that she was in the midst of exciting events such as she had sometimes read of, but in which she had never expected to play a part. There were all the characters belonging to the situation. There was the beautiful, neglected young wife, the cruel and selfish husband, the broken-down father, the two young men who had formerly loved the heroine, and last, but not least, there was Dolly herself. It was all very interesting and very theatrical, she thought, and she wished that she might watch it or watch the developments in the successive scenes, entirely as a spectator, and without feeling what was really uppermost in her heart — a touch of sincere sympathy for her friend's trouble.

Just as she was thinking of all that Marion had to suffer, John Darche, the prime cause and promoter of the trouble, entered the room, pale, nervous, and evidently in the worst of humours.

"Oh, are you here, Miss Maylands?" he inquired, discontentedly.

Dolly looked up quietly.

"Yes. Am I in the way? Marion has just gone with Mr. Darche to his study. This note came a few moments ago and she gave it to me to read. I think you ought to see it."

John Darche's brow contracted as he ran his eye over the page. Then he slowly tore the note to shreds and tossed them into the fire.

"I do not know why my wife thinks it necessary to take all her friends into the confidences of the family," he said, thrusting his hands into his pockets and going to the window, thereby turning his back upon Dolly.

Dolly made no answer to the rude speech, but quietly continued to cut the pages of the magazine, until, seeing that Darche did not move and being herself rather nervous, she broke the silence again.

"Am I in the way, Mr. Darche?"

"Not at all, not at all," said John, waking, perhaps, to a sense of his rudeness and returning to the fireplace. "On the contrary," he continued, "it is as well that you should be here. There will probably be hysterics during the course of the day, and I have no doubt you know what is the right thing to do under the circumstances. There seems to be

a horticultural show here," he added, as he noticed for the first time the vases of flowers on the tables.

"They are beautiful roses," answered Dolly in a conciliatory tone.

"Yes," said John, drawing in his thin lips. "Beautiful, expensive — and not particularly appropriate to-day. One of my wife's old friends, I suppose. Do you know who sent them?"

"Stubbs brought them in, a little while ago," Dolly replied. "I believe there was no note with them."

"No note," repeated John, still in a tone of discontent. "It is rude to send flowers without even a card. It is assuming too much intimacy."

"Is it?" asked Dolly innocently.

"Of course it is," answered John.

"Half an hour," he said, after a moment's pause. "Half an hour! How long is it since that note came?"

"About twenty minutes I should think."

"Doctors are generally punctual," observed Darche. "They will be here in a few minutes."

"Shall you be present?" asked Dolly.

"Certainly not," John answered with decision. "It would give me very little satisfaction to see my father proved an idiot by three fools."

"Fools!" repeated Dolly in surprise.

"Yes. All doctors are fools. The old gentleman's head is as clear as mine. What difference does it make if he does not recognise people he only half knows? He understands everything connected with the business, and that is the principal thing. After all, what has he to do? He signs his name to the papers that are put before him. That is all. He could do that if he really had softening of the brain, as they pretend he has. As for electing another president at the present moment it is out of the question."

"Yes, so I should suppose," said Dolly.

John turned sharply upon her.

"So you should suppose? Why should you suppose any such thing?"

"I have heard that the Company is in trouble," answered Dolly, calmly.

John opened his lips as though he were about to make a sharp answer, but checked himself and turned away.

"Yes," he said more quietly, "I suppose that news is public property by this time. There they are," he added, as his ear caught the distant tinkle of the door bell.

"Shall I go?" asked Dolly for the third time.

"No," answered Darche, "I will go out and meet them. Stay here please. I will send my wife to you presently."

CHAPTER V.

THE verdict of the doctors was a foregone conclusion. The family physician, who was one of the three, the other two being specialists, stayed behind and explained to John Darche the result of the examination. There was no hope of recovery, he said, nor even of improvement. The most that could be done was to give the old gentleman the best of care so long as he remained alive. Little by little his faculties would fail, and in a few years, if he did not die, he would be quite as helpless as a little child.

John Darche was not in a state to receive the information with equanimity, though he had expected nothing else and knew that every word the doctor said was true — and more also. He protested, as he had protested to Dolly half an hour earlier, that Mr. Darche was still a serviceable president for the Company, since he could sign his name, no matter whether he understood

the value of the signature or not. The doctor, who, like most people, was aware of the investigation then proceeding, shook his head, smiled incredulously, asked after Mrs. Darche and went away, pondering upon the vanity of human affairs and consoling himself for the sins of the world with the wages thereof, most of which ultimately find their way to the doctor's bank-book, be the event life or death.

Old Mr. Darche, supremely unconscious of what had taken place, and believing that he had been giving the benefit of his valuable advice to the directors of a western railroad, had lighted one of his very fine cigars and had fallen asleep in his easy chair in his own study before it was half finished. Marion had returned to Dolly in the library and John had sent for his stenographer and had taken possession of the front drawing-room for the morning, on pretence of attending to the business which, in reality, had already been withdrawn from his hands during several weeks.

He was in great suspense and anxiety, for it was expected that the work of the investigating

committee would end on that afternoon. He knew that in any event he was ruined, and even he felt that it would be humiliating to live on his wife's income. They would go abroad at once, he thought, New York had become hateful to him. He had as yet no apprehension of being deprived of his liberty, even temporarily. Whatever action was taken against him must be of a civil nature, he thought. He did not believe that any judge would issue a warrant for his arrest on such evidence as could have been collected by the committee. Simon Darche was incapable of remembering what he had done even a week previously, and since the doctors declared that his mind was gone, almost anything might be attributed to him — anything, in fact, about which the slightest trace of irregularity could be discovered. John had been cautious enough in his actions when he had been aware that he was violating the law, though he had been utterly reckless when he had appealed to chance in the hope of retrieving his losses, and recovering himself. He believed himself safe, and indulged in speculations about the future as a relief to the excessive anxiety of the moment.

Mrs. Darche had some right to know the result of the consultation which had taken place, but her husband either intended to leave her in ignorance or forgot her existence after the doctors had left the house. During some time she remained with Dolly in the library, expecting that John would at least send her some message, if he did not choose to come himself. At last she determined to go to him.

"I am very busy now," he said as she entered the room and glanced at the secretary.

"Yes," answered Mrs. Darche, "I see, but I must speak to you alone for a minute."

"Well — but I wish you would choose some other time." He nodded to the secretary who rose and quietly disappeared.

"What is it?" asked Darche, when they were alone.

"What did the doctors say?"

"Oh, nothing at all. They talked as doctors always do. Keep the patient in good health, plenty of fresh air, food and sleep." He laughed sourly at his own words.

"Is that all?" inquired Marion, rather incred-

ulously. "They must have said something else. Why, we can all see that he is not himself. There is something very seriously wrong. I am quite sure that he did not recognise me yesterday."

"Not recognise you?" said John with the same disagreeable laugh. "Not recognise you? Do not be silly. He talks of nobody else. I tell you there is nothing in the world the matter with him, he is good for another twenty years."

"Thank heaven for that — for the twenty years of life, whether with all his faculties or not — "

"Yes, by all means let us return thanks. At the present rate of interest on his life that means at least two millions."

"It hurts me to hear you talk like that about your father," said Marion, sitting down and watching her husband as he walked slowly up and down before her.

"Does it? That is interesting. I wonder why you are hurt because he is likely to live twenty years. You are not very likely to be hurt by his death."

"Did I ever suggest such a thing?"

"No, it suggested itself."

At this speech Mrs. Darche rose. Standing quite still for a moment, she looked quietly into his uncertain eyes. He was evidently in the worst of humours, and quite unable to control himself, even had he wished to do so. She felt that it would be safer to leave him, for her own temper was overwrought and ready to break out. She turned towards the door. Then he called her back.

"I say, Marion!"

"Well."

"What are you making such a fuss about?"

"Have I said anything?"

"No, not much, but you have a particularly uncomfortable way of letting one see what you would like to say."

"Is that why you called me back?" asked Mrs. Darche on the point of turning away again.

"I suppose so. It certainly was not for the pleasure of prolonging this delightful interview."

Once more she moved in the direction of the door. Then something seemed to tighten about her heart, something long forgotten, and which, if she tried to understand it at all, she thought

was pity. It was nothing — only a dead love turning in its grave. But it hurt her, and she stopped and looked back. John Darche was leaning against the high mantlepiece, shading his eyes from the fire with his small, pointed white hand. She came and stood beside him.

"John," she said gently, "I want to speak to you seriously. I am very sorry if I was hasty just now. Please forget it."

Darche looked up, pulled out his watch and glanced at it, and then looked at her again before he answered. His eyes were hard and dull.

"I think I said that I was rather busy this morning," he answered slowly.

"Yes, I know," answered Marion, in her sweet, low voice. "But I will not keep you long. I must speak. John, is this state of things to go on for ever?"

"I fancy not. The death of one of us is likely to put a stop to it before eternity sets in," he answered with some scorn.

"We can stop it now if we will but try," said Marion, laying her hand entreatingly upon his arm.

"Oh yes, no doubt," observed John coldly.

"Let me speak, please, this once," said Mrs. Darche. "I know that you are worried and harassed about business, and you know that I want to spare you all I can, and would help you if I could."

"I doubt whether your help would be conducive to the interests of the Company," observed Darche.

"No — I know that I cannot help you in that way. But if you would only let me, in other ways, I could make it so much easier for you."

"Could you?" asked John, turning upon her immediately. "Then just lend me a hundred thousand dollars."

Mrs. Darche started a little at the words. As has been said, she was really quite in ignorance of what was taking place and had no idea that her husband could be in need of what in comparison with the means of the Company seemed but a small sum in cash.

"Do you need money, John?" she asked, looking at him anxiously.

"Oh no, I was only putting an imaginary case."

"I wish it were not merely imaginary — "

"Do you?" he asked, interrupting her quickly. "That is kind."

Marion seemed about to lose her temper at last, though she meant to control herself.

"John!" she exclaimed, in a tone of reproach, "why will you so misunderstand me?"

"It is you who misunderstand everything."

"I mean it quite seriously," she answered. "You know if you were really in trouble for a sum like that, I could help you. Not that you ever could be. I was only thinking — wishing that in some way or other I might be of use. If I could help you in anything, no matter how insignificant, it would bring us together."

John smiled incredulously.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, "is that what you are driving at? Do you not think life is very bearable as we are?"

By this time Marion had completely regained her self-possession. She was determined not to be repulsed, but there was a little bitterness in her voice as she spoke.

"No, frankly, John, as we are living now, life

is not very bearable. I cannot exchange half a dozen words with you without quarrelling, and it is not my fault, John, it is not my fault! Could you not sometimes make it a little easier for me?"

"By borrowing a hundred thousand dollars?"

A pause followed John's answer, and he walked as far as the window, came back again and stopped.

"If you think it would be conducive to our conjugal happiness that I should owe you a hundred thousand dollars, by all means lend it to me. I will give you very good security and pay you the current rate of interest."

Mrs. Darche hesitated a moment before she spoke again. She was not quite sure that he was in earnest, and being determined to make the utmost use of the opportunity she had created, she dreaded lest if she pressed her offer upon him he should suddenly turn upon her with a brutal laugh.

"Do you really mean it, John?" she asked at last. "Will it help you at all?"

"Oh, if you insist upon it and think it will promote your happiness, I have no objection to taking it," said Darche coolly. "As a matter of fact it would be a convenience to-day, and it might

help me to-morrow. It will certainly not be of any importance next week."

"I do not know whether you are in earnest or not, but I am."

Once more she paused. She realised that he was in need of a great deal of money, and that his scornful acceptance of her offer was really his way of expressing real interest.

"You shall have it as soon as I can get it for you. If you really need it I shall be very glad. If you are only laughing at me — well, I can bear that too."

"No," answered John, speaking much more seriously than hitherto. "It is a simple matter, of course — but it is quite true that it would be a convenience to me to have a hundred thousand dollars in cash during the next twenty-four hours, and after all, it will not make any difference to you, as so much of your property is in bonds. All you need to do is to borrow the money on call and give the bonds as collateral."

"I do not understand those things, of course," said Marion in a tone of grief, "but I suppose it can be managed easily enough, and I shall be

so proud if I am able to help you a little. Oh, John," she added, after a little pause, "if we could only be as we used to be, everything to each other."

"I wish we could," John answered with real or assumed gravity. "But in this existence, there is everything to separate us and hardly anything to bring us together. You see, I am worried all day long, I never get any rest and then I lose my temper about everything. I know it is wrong but I cannot help it, and you must try to be as patient as you can, my dear."

"I do try, John, I do try, do I not? Say that you know that I do." For a moment she thought she had produced an impression upon him, and a vision of a happier and more peaceful life rose suddenly before her ready imagination. But the tone in which he spoke the next words dispelled any such illusion.

"Oh yes," he said dryly, "I know you do, of course. You are awfully good — and I am awfully bad. I will reform as soon as I have time. And now, if you do not mind, I will go and attend to my letters."

"And I will see about getting the money at once," she said, bravely hiding her disappointment at his change of tone. "I may be able to have it by this evening."

"Oh yes," he answered with some eagerness, "if you are quick about it. Well good-bye, and I am really much more grateful then I seem."

His dry unpleasant laugh was the last sound she heard as she left the room. After all, it seemed perfectly useless, though she did her best all day and every day.

Marion Darche left her husband more than ever convinced of the hopelessness of any attempt at a happier and more united existence. Faithful, brave, loving, a woman of heart rather than head, she encountered in every such effort the blank wall of a windowless nature, so to say — the dull opposition of a heartless intelligence incapable of understanding any natural impulse except that of self-preservation, and responding to no touch of sympathy or love. Against her will, she wondered why she had married him, and tried to recall the time when his obstinacy had seemed strength, his dulness gravity, his brutality keenness. But

no inner conjuring with self could give an instant's life to the dead illusion. The nearest approach to any real resurrection which she had felt for years had been the little pang that had overtaken her when she had turned to leave him and had thought for one moment that he might be suffering, as she was apt to suffer — this being, whom she had once misunderstood and loved, whom she loved not at all now, but to whom she had been lovelessly faithful in word and thought and deed for years past.

Yet she knew that others had loved her well, most of all Harry Brett, and girl-like, groping for her heart's half-grown truth she had once believed that she loved him too, with his boyish, careless ways, his thoughtless talk and his love of happiness for its own sake. He had disappointed her in some little way, being over-light of leaf and flower, though the stem was good to the core; she had looked for strength on the surface as a child breaks a twig and laughs at the oak for its weakness; she had expected, perhaps, to be led and ruled by a hand that would be tender and obedient only for her, and she had turned from Harry Brett to John Darche as from a delusion

to a fact, from a dream to the strong truth of waking — very bitter waking in the end.

But though she had wrecked heart and happiness, and had suffered that cold and hunger of the soul which the body can never feel, she would not change her course nor give up the dream of hope. Worse than what had been, could not be to come, she said to herself, realising how little difference financial ruin, even to herself, could make now.

As she took up her pen to write a word to Brett, begging him to come to her without delay, she paused a moment, thinking how strange it was that in an extremity she should be obliged to send for him, who had loved her, to help her to save her husband, if salvation were possible. She even felt a little warmth about her heart, knowing how quickly Harry would come, and she was glad that she had known how to turn a boy's romantic attachment into a man's solid friendship. Brett would not disappoint her.

She sent Dolly away, and Dolly, obedient, docile and long-suffering for her friend's sake, kissed her on both pale cheeks and left her, tripping down the brown steps with a light gait *and a heavy* heart.

CHAPTER VI.

MARION had sent a messenger down town after Brett, and the latter did not lose a moment in answering the note in person. He was a little pale as he entered.

"What is it?" he asked, almost before he had shaken hands.

"It is kind of you to come at once," answered Marion. "I asked you to come about a matter of business. Sit down. I will explain."

"Can I be of any use?"

"Yes, I want some money, a great deal of money, in fact, and I want it immediately."

"Are you going to buy a house?" he inquired in some surprise. "How much do you want?"

"A hundred thousand dollars."

Brett did not answer at once. He looked at her rather anxiously, then stared at the fire, then looked at her again.

"It is rather short notice for such an amount.

But you have nearly as much as that in bonds and mortgages."

"Yes, I know."

"Well then, there need not be any difficulty. What you have in bonds you have already, to all intents and purposes. Do I understand that you want this money in cash?"

"Yes," answered Mrs. Darche with decision, "in cash."

"I suppose a cheque will do as well?" suggested Brett with a smile.

"A cheque?" She repeated the word and seemed to hesitate. "I should have to write my name on it, should I not?"

"Yes."

During the pause which followed, Marion seemed to be reviewing the aspects of the transaction.

"The name of the person to whom I give it?" she asked at last, and she seemed to avoid his glance.

"Yes," answered Brett, surprised at the inexperience betrayed by the question, "unless you cashed it yourself and took the money in notes."

"No," said Mrs. Darche, as firmly as before. "I

want the notes here, please. What I want you to do, is to take enough bonds and get the money for me. I do not care to know anything else about it, because I shall not understand."

"I suppose I ought not to be inquisitive, my dear friend," replied Brett after a little hesitation, "but I ought to tell you what you do not seem to realise, that a hundred thousand dollars is a great deal of money and that you ought not to keep such a sum in the house."

"I do not mean to keep it in the house. It is to be taken away immediately."

"I see."

He concluded that the money was to be taken from the house by John Darche, and he determined to prevent such a result if possible.

"May I ask one question?" he inquired.

"I will not promise to answer it." She still looked away from him.

"I hope you will. Do you mean to lend this money to some one? If it were an ordinary payment you would certainly not want it in notes in the house."

"How do you know?" asked Marion with some impatience.

"Because no human man of business with whom I have ever had anything to do likes to trot about town with a hundred thousand dollars' worth of notes in his pocket. And there is very little doubt in my mind about what you mean to do with the money. You mean to give it to your husband. Am I right?"

Mrs. Darche blushed a little and a shade of annoyance crossed her face.

"Why should I tell you what I am to do with it?" she asked.

"Because I am your legal adviser," answered Brett without hesitating, "and I may give you some good advice."

"Thank you, I do not want any advice."

Another pause followed this declaration, which only seemed to confirm the lawyer in his surmises.

"I will call it by another name," he said at last in a conciliatory tone. "I will call it information. But it is information of a kind that you do not expect. I should certainly not have said anything about it if you had not sent for me on this business. Is it of any use to beg you to reconsider the question of lending this *money*?"

"No, I have made up my mind."

"To lend it to your husband?"

"Dear Mr. Brett," said Marion, beginning to be impatient again, "I said that I would rather not tell you."

"I fancy that I am not mistaken," Brett answered. "Now my dear friend, you will be the last to know what every one has known for some time, but it is time that you should know it. The affairs of the Company are in a very bad state, so bad indeed, that an inquiry has been going on into the management. I do not know the result of it yet, but I am very much afraid that it will be bad, and that it will have very disagreeable consequences for you all."

"Consequences?" repeated Mrs. Darche. "What consequences? Do you mean that we shall lose money?"

"I mean that and I mean something more. It is very serious. Your husband is deeply involved, and his father's name is so closely associated with his in all the transactions that it seems almost impossible to say which of the two is innocent."

"Innocent!" cried Marion, laying her hand

suddenly upon the arm of her chair and starting forward, then rising quickly to her feet and looking down at him. "What do you mean? Why do you use that word?"

The expression had hardly escaped Brett's lips when he realised the extent of his carelessness. He rose and stood beside her, feeling, as a man does, that she had him at a disadvantage while he was seated and she was standing.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "I should have been more careful. I should have said which of the two is responsible for—"

"Something disgraceful?" interrupted Mrs. Darche whose excitement was only increased by his hesitation. "For heaven's sake, do not keep me in this suspense. Speak! Tell me! Be quick!"

"I should not have spoken at all except as your adviser," said Brett. "Nothing definite is known yet, but something is wrong. As a purely business transaction it is madness to lend money to John Darche. Can you believe for a moment that the treasurer of such a Company, that the men who control such a Company, would ask you

to lend them a hundred thousand dollars at a few hours' notice, if they were not on the very verge of ruin?"

"No, but that is not what happened."

She stopped short and moved away from him a little, hesitating as to what she should say next. It was impossible to describe to him the scene which had taken place between her and her husband.

"I cannot tell you, and yet I want you to know," she said, at last.

"Do you not trust me?" said Brett, hoping to encourage her.

"Certainly. Trust you! Oh yes, I trust you with all my heart."

She turned and faced him again.

"Then tell me," said he. "Tell me what happened in as few words as possible. Just the bare facts."

"It is the bare facts that are so hard to tell."

She turned away from him again feeling that if she allowed her eyes to meet his she could not long withhold her confidence.

"I suppose your husband let you guess that

there was trouble, so that you made the offer spontaneously, and then he accepted it."

"Well — yes — no — almost."

Still she hesitated, standing by the writing-table, and idly turning over the papers.

"I saw that he was worried and harassed and that something was wearing upon him, and I did so want to help him! I thought it might — no I will not say that."

"But it will not help matters to throw good money after bad," answered Brett thoughtfully. "Believe me, there is no more chance of saving this money you mean to give him, than all the other millions that have gone through his hands — gone heaven knows where."

"Millions?"

There was surprise in her tone.

"I am afraid so," answered Brett, as though he had no reason in making any correction in his estimate.

"You must tell me all you can, all you know," said Marion, turning to him again.

"That would be a long affair," said Brett, "though I know a great deal about it. But I do

not know all, though the situation is simple enough and bad enough. In spite of the large earnings of the Company, the finances are in a rotten state and it is said that there are large sums not accounted for. An inquiry has been going on for some time, and was, I believe, closed last night, but the result will not be known until this afternoon."

"What sort of an inquiry?" asked Mrs. Darche, anxiously.

"The regular examination of the books and of all the details which have gone through the hands of your father-in-law and your husband."

"My father-in-law! Do you mean to say that they are trying to implicate the old gentleman too?"

Marion's face expressed the utmost concern.

"As president of the Company, he cannot fail to be implicated."

"But he is no more responsible for what he does than a child!" cried Mrs. Darche, in a tone of protestation.

"I know that, but he is nominally at the head of the administration. That is all you need know.

The rest is merely a mass of figures with an account of tricks and manipulations which you could not understand."

"And what would happen if — if — "

She leaned towards him unconsciously, watching his lips to catch the answer.

"I suppose that if the inquiry goes against them, legal steps will be taken," said Brett.

"Legal steps? What legal steps?"

Brett hesitated, asking himself whether he should be justified in telling her what he expected as well as what he knew.

"Well — " he continued at last, "you know in such cases the injured parties appeal to the law. But it is of no use to talk about that until you know the result of the inquiry."

"Do you mean, do you really mean that John may be arrested?" asked Mrs. Darche, turning pale.

"At any moment."

Brett answered in a low voice. Almost as soon as he had spoken he left her side and crossed the room as though not wishing to be a witness to the effect the news must have upon

her. Before his back was turned she sank into a chair and covered her face with her hands. A long pause followed. Marion was the first to speak.

"Mr. Brett — " she said, and stopped.

"Yes." He came back to her side at once.

"Can you not help me?" she asked earnestly.

"How can I?"

"Is there nothing, nothing that can be done?"

"The whole matter is already beyond my power, or yours, or any one's."

Marion looked steadily at him for several seconds and then turned her face away, leaning against the mantelpiece.

"I am sure something can be done."

"No, nothing can be done."

He did not move, and spoke in a tone of the utmost decision.

"That is not true," said Marion turning upon him suddenly. "Money can help him, and we are wasting time. Do not lose a moment! Take all I have in the world and turn it into money and take it to him. Go! Do not lose a moment! Go! Why do you wait? Why do you look at me so?"

"It would not be a drop in the bucket," answered Brett, still not moving.

"All I have!"

"All you have."

"That is impossible," cried Mrs. Darche, incredulously. "I am not enormously rich, but it is something. It is between four and five hundred thousand dollars. Is it not? I have heard you say so."

"Something like that," assented Brett, as though the statement did not alter the case.

Mrs. Darche came close to him, laid her hand upon his arm and gently pushed him, as though urging him to leave her.

"Go! I say," she cried. "Take it. Do as I tell you. There may be time yet. It may save them."

But Brett did not move.

"It is utterly useless," he said stolidly. "It is merely throwing money out of the window. Millions could not stop the inquiry now, nor prevent the law from taking its course if it is appealed to."

"You will not do it?" asked Marion with something almost like a menace in her voice.

"No, I will not," said Brett, more warmly. "I will not let you ruin yourself for nothing."

"Are you really my friend?"

She drew back a little and looked at him earnestly.

"Your friend? Yes — and more — more than that, far more than you can dream of."

"Will you refuse, do you refuse, to do this for me?"

"Yes, I refuse."

"Then I will do it for myself," she said with a change of tone as though she had suddenly come to a decision. "I will let my husband do it for me. You cannot refuse to give me what is mine, what you have in your keeping."

But Brett drew back and folded his arms.

"I can refuse and I do refuse," he said.

"But you cannot! You have no right."

Her voice was almost breaking.

"That makes no difference," Brett answered firmly. "I have the power. I refuse to give you anything. You can bring an action against me for robbing you, and you will win your case, but by that time it will be too late. You may borrow

money on your mere name, but your securities and title-deeds are in my safe, and there they shall stay."

Marion looked at him one moment longer and then sank back into her seat.

"You are cruel and unkind," she said in broken tones. "Oh, what shall I do?"

Brett hesitated, not knowing exactly what to do, and not finding anything especial to say. It is generally the privilege of man to be the bearer of whatever bad news is in store for woman, but as yet no hard and fast rule of conduct has been laid down for the unfortunate messenger's action under the circumstances. Being at a loss for words with which to console the woman he loved for the pain he had unwillingly given her, Brett sat down opposite her and tried to take her hand. She drew it away hastily.

"No, go away," she said almost under her breath. "Leave me alone. I thought you were my friend."

"Indeed I am," protested Brett in a soothing tone.

"Indeed you are not."

Marion sat up suddenly and drew back to her end of the sofa.

"Do you call this friendship?" she asked almost bitterly. "To refuse to help me at such a moment. Do you not see how I am suffering? Do you not see what is at stake? My husband's reputation, his father's name, good name, life perhaps — the shock of a disgrace would kill him — and for me, everything! And you sit there and refuse to lift a finger to help me — oh, it is too much! Indeed it is more than I can bear!"

"Of course you cannot understand it all now," said Brett, very much distressed. "You cannot see that I am right, but you will see it soon, too soon. You cannot save him. Why should you ruin yourself?"

"Why?"

"Is there some other reason," asked Brett, quickly. "Something that I do not know?"

"All the reasons," she exclaimed passionately, "all the reasons there ever were."

"Do you love him still?" asked Brett, scarcely knowing what he was saying.

Marion drew still further back from him and spoke in an altered tone.

"Mr. Brett, you have no right to ask me such a question."

"No right? I? No, perhaps I have no right. But I take the right whether it is mine or not. Because I love you still, as I have always loved you, because there is nothing in heaven or earth I would not do for you, because if you asked me for all I possessed at this moment, you should have it, to do what you like with it — though you shall have nothing of what is yours — because, to save you the least pain, I would take John Darche's place and go to prison and be called a rascal and a thief before all the world, for your sake, for your dear sake, Marion. I love you. You know that I love you. Right or wrong — but it is right and not wrong! There is not a man in the world who would do for any woman the least of the things I would do for you."

Again he tried to take her hand, though she resisted and snatched it from him after a little struggle.

"Leave me! leave me!" she cried despairingly. "Let me go!"

"Not until you know, not until you understand that every word I say means ten thousand times more than it ever meant to any one, not until you

know that I love you through and through with every part of me, with every thought and action of my life. Look at me! Look into my eyes! Do you not see it there, the truth, the devotion? No? Is it so long since I loved you and you said — you thought — you believed for one little day that you loved me? Can you not remember it? Can you not remember even the sound of the words? They were so sweet to hear! They are so very sweet as they come back now — with all they mean now — but could not mean then!"

"Harry!"

She could not resist pronouncing his name that once.

"I knew it! You loved me then. You love me now. What is the use of fighting against it, when we love each other so? Marion! Love! Ah God! At last!"

"Go!"

With a quick movement she sprang to her feet and stood back from him.

"Marion!"

But in a moment it was past. With a gesture she kept him at arm's length.

"Is that your friendship?" she asked reproachfully.

"No, it is love," he answered almost roughly. "There is no friendship in it."

"And you talk of helping me!" she cried. "And at such a time as this, when I am weak, unstrung, you force it all upon me, and drag out what I have hidden so long. No, no! You do not love me. Go!"

"Not love you!" Again he tried to get near her. "God in heaven! Do not hurt me so!"

"No," she answered, still thrusting him back. "If you loved me you would help me, you would respect me, you would honour me, you would not try to drag me down."

"Drag you down! Ah, Marion!"

He spoke very unsteadily, then turning his face from her he leaned upon the mantelpiece and watched the fire. A long pause followed. After awhile he looked up again and their eyes met.

"Harry!" said Mrs. Darche quietly.

"Yes," he answered.

"Come and sit beside me on that chair."

Brett obeyed.

"We must forget this morning," said Marion in her natural tone of voice. "We must say to ourselves that all this has never happened and we must believe it. Will you?"

"You ask too much," answered Brett looking away. "I cannot forget that I have said it—at last, after all these years."

"You must forget it. You must—must—for my sake."

"For your sake?" Still he looked away from her.

"Yes, for my sake," she repeated. "If you cannot forget, I can never look any one in the face again. "Look at me, please," she said, laying her hand upon his arm. "Look into my eyes and tell me that you will not remember."

"For your sake I will try not to remember," he said slowly. "But I cannot promise yet," he added with sudden passion. "Oh no!"

"You will do your best. I know you will," said Marion, in a tone that was meant to express conviction. "Now go. And remember that I have forgotten."

"You are very kind," Brett answered with more

humility than she had expected. "You are very good to me. I was mad for a moment. Forgive me. Try to forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive, for I remember nothing," said Marion with a faint smile.

"Good-bye, then." He turned to go.

"Good-bye," she answered quite naturally.

"Now come back, please," she said, when he had almost reached the door. "You are Mr. Brett now, and I am Mrs. Darche. I am in great trouble and you are my friend, and you must help me as well as you can."

"In any way I can," he answered, coming back to her. "But I will help only you, I will not help any one else."

"Not even old Mr. Darche?"

"Yes, I do not mean to except him."

"That is right. And we must act quickly. We must decide what is to be done. We have," she hesitated, "we have lost time — at any moment it may be too late."

"It is too late now," Brett answered in a sudden change of tone, as Stubbs the butler suddenly entered the room.

"Please madam," said Stubbs, who was pale and evidently very much disturbed, "there are some strange gentlemen to see Mr. John Darche, and when I told them that he was out, they said they would see old Mr. Darche, and I said that old Mr. Darche was ill and could see no one, and they said they must see him; and they are coming upstairs without leave, and here they are, madam, and I cannot keep them out!"

CHAPTER VII.

BAIL was refused, and John Darche remained in prison during the weeks that intervened between his arrest and his trial. He was charged with making use of large sums, the property of the Company, for which he was unable to account, with fraudulently tampering with the books and with attempting to issue certificates of stock to a very large amount, bearing forged signatures.

The house in Lexington Avenue was very gloomy and silent. Simon Darche, who was of course in ignorance of what had taken place, had caught cold and was confined to his bed. It was said that he was breaking down at last, and that his heart was affected. Dolly Maylands came daily and spent long hours with her friend, but not even her bright face could bring light into the house. Russell Vanbrugh and Harry Brett also came almost every day. Vanbrugh

had undertaken Darche's defence, out of friendship for Marion, and it was natural that he should come. As for Brett, he could not stay away, and as Mrs. Darche seemed to have forgiven and forgotten his passionate outbreak and did not bid him discontinue his visits, he saw no reason for doing so on any other ground.

He was, on the whole, a very loyal-hearted man, and was very much ashamed of having seemed to take advantage of Marion's distress, to speak as he had spoken. But he was neither over-sensitive nor in any way morbid. Seeing that she intended to forgive him, he did not distress himself with self-accusations nor doubt that her forgiveness was sincere and complete. Besides, her present distress was so great that he felt instinctively her total forgetfulness of smaller matters, and even went so far as to believe himself forgotten. Meanwhile he watched every opportunity of helping Marion, and would have been ready at a moment's notice to do anything whatever which could have alleviated her suffering in the slightest degree. Nevertheless, he congratulated himself that he was not a criminal

lawyer, like Vanbrugh, and that it had not fallen to his share to defend John Darche, thief, swindler, and forger. He would have done that, and more also, as Vanbrugh was doing, for Marion's sake, no doubt, but he was very glad that it could not be asked of him. It was bad enough that he should be put into the witness-box to state on his oath such facts as he could remember to Darche's advantage, and to be cross-examined and re-examined, and forced through the endless phases of torture to which witnesses are usually subjected. He was able, at least, to establish the fact that not the smallest sum had ever, so far as he knew, passed from the hands of John Darche to his wife's credit. On being asked why, as Mrs. Darche's man of business, he had not invested any of her money in the Company, he replied that his father had managed the estate before him, and that his father's prejudices and his own were wholly in favour of investment in real estate, bonds of long-established railways and first mortgages, and that Mrs. Darche had left her affairs entirely in his hands.

Marion herself gave her evidence bravely and truthfully, doing her best to speak to her husband's advantage. Her appearance and manner excited universal sympathy, to use the language of the reports of the case, but what she said did not tend in any way to exculpate John Darche. On the contrary, society learned for the first time from her lips that she had led a most unhappy life. She suffered acutely under the cross-examination. Being excessively truthful, she gave her answers without the slightest distortion of fact, while doing her best to pass over altogether any statement which could injure her husband's defence. As often happens, what she omitted to say told most heavily against him, while the little she was forced to admit concerning his father's condition amply corroborated the medical opinion of the latter's state, and proved beyond a doubt that he had been during more than a year a mere instrument in his son's hands. He, at least, was wholly innocent, and would be suffered to spend his few remaining years in the dreams of a peaceful dotage.

The court, to use the current phrase, showed

Marion every consideration. That is, she was tacitly admitted from the first to have had no connection whatever with the crime of which her husband was accused. To the last, she intended to be present when the judge summed up the case, in order to help John to the end by seeming to believe in his innocence. On that very day, however, Simon Darche was so far recovered as to be able to leave his room for the first time, and her presence at his side seemed absolutely necessary. It was most important that all knowledge of what was happening should be kept from him. He was quite capable of leaving the house if left to himself, and he would certainly not have submitted to any suggestion to the contrary offered by Stubbs.

He might stroll into a club or into the house of some old friend, and some one would be sure to offer him the tactless sympathy which goes about to betray secrets. Moreover, he had been told, in explanation of John's protracted absence, that the latter had been obliged to go away on business, and he had enough memory and power of reasoning left to be surprised at

receiving no letters. He was sure to make inquiries about John, if left to his own devices. Marion could not leave him. In the midst of her extreme anxiety she was obliged to pass the greater part of the day in reading to him, and in trying to divert his mind from the thought of John and his absence. His love and mistaken admiration for his son had been the strongest feelings in his life and continued to the end.

Dolly Maylands would have been faithful to Marion under any imaginable circumstances, with that whole-souled belief and trust which is girlhood's greatest charm. On the last day of the trial she came in the morning and did not leave the house again. Brett appeared at intervals and told Dolly how matters were going.

He was not a man like Vanbrugh, of very varied acquaintances and wide experience, but in certain quarters he had great influence, and on Marion's behalf he exerted it to the utmost on the present occasion. Foreseeing that the verdict must inevitably be unfavourable, and knowing of Simon Darche's great anxiety about his son's absence, Brett succeeded in obtaining an order

to bring John Darche to see his father before he should be taken back to prison after the conclusion of the trial. It was agreed that the police officers should appear dressed as civilians, and should be introduced with John to the old man's presence as men of business accompanying his son. John would then have the opportunity of quieting his father's apprehensions in regard to his future absence, and he could take leave of his wife if he wished to do so, though of course he would not be allowed to be even a moment out of his guardians' sight. The order was ostensibly granted in consideration of Simon Darche's mental infirmity, and of the danger to his health which any shock must cause, and which already existed in the shape of acute anxiety. In reality, the favour was granted as a personal one to Brett. When everything was arranged, he returned to Lexington Avenue. He found Dolly alone in the library and told her what he had done.

It was very quiet in the room, and the dusk was stealing away the last glow of the sunset that hung over the trees and houses of Gramercy Park.

Dolly sat near the window, looking out, her hands clasped upon one knee, her fair young face very grave and sad. Brett paced the floor nervously.

"How kind you are!" Dolly exclaimed.

"Kind?" repeated the young man, almost indignantly, and stopping in his walk as he spoke. "Who would not do as much if he could?"

"Lots of people."

"Not of her friends — not of those who know her. It is little enough that I can do for any of them. Vanbrugh has done more than I — can do much more."

"What a fight he has made!" The ready enthusiasm rang in the girl's clear voice. Then her tone changed as she continued. "Yes," she said thoughtfully, "Marion is lucky to have such friends as you and Russell Vanbrugh."

"And you yourself, Miss Maylands."

"I? Oh, I do not count. What can a woman do on days like these? I can only stay here and try to make her feel that I am a comfortable pillow for her to lay her head upon, when she is entirely worn out. Poor Marion! She is the bravest woman I ever knew. But then —"

She stopped, hesitating, and Brett, who was almost too much excited to follow all the words she spoke, was suddenly aware that she had not finished the sentence.

"What were you going to say?" he asked, struggling desperately to remember what she had said already.

"I hardly ought — I suppose," objected Dolly. "But then — what can it matter? He is sure to be found guilty, is he not?"

"Quite sure," Brett answered slowly.

"Well then — Marion must feel that when this last agony is over she will have much more peace in her life than she has enjoyed for a long time. I wonder whether it is very wrong to say such things."

"Wrong? Why? We all think them, I am sure. At least, you and Vanbrugh and I do. As for society, I do not know what it thinks. I have not had time to ask, nor time to care, for that matter."

"I suppose everybody sympathises with Marion as we do."

"Oh, of course. Do you know? I believe she

will be more popular than before. Everything that has come out in this abominable trial has been in her favour. People realise what a life she has been living during all these years — without a complaint. Wonderful woman! That brute Darche! I wish he were to be hanged instead of sent to the Penitentiary!"

"He deserves it," answered Dolly with the utmost conviction. "I suppose Marion will get a divorce."

Again Brett stopped short in his walk and looked at her keenly. The idea had doubtless passed through his own mind, but he had not heard any one else express it as yet.

"After all," he said slowly, "there is no reason why she should not."

Then he suddenly relapsed into silence and resumed his walk.

"And then I suppose," said Dolly thoughtfully, "she would marry again."

Brett said nothing to this, but continued to pace the floor, glancing at the young girl from time to time, and meditating on the total depravity of innocence.

"She might marry Russell Vanbrugh, for instance," observed Dolly, as though talking to herself.

This was too much for Brett. For the third time he stopped and faced her.

"Why Vanbrugh, of all people?" he asked.

"Of all people, Mr. Vanbrugh, I should think," Dolly answered. "Think of what he has done, how devoted he has been in all this trouble. And then, the way she spoils him! Any one can see that she is ready to fall in love with him. If she were not as good as — as anything can be — as spring water and snow drops and angels' prayers, so to say, she would be in love with him already. But then, she is, you know."

"I cannot imagine a woman being in love with Vanbrugh," said Brett impatiently.

"Oh, can't you? I can. I thought he was your best friend."

"What has that to do with it? My best friend might be deaf and lame and blind of one eye."

"Also, he might not," said Dolly with a smile.

"Oh, well!" exclaimed Brett, turning away, "if

you have made up your mind that Mrs. Darche is to marry Russell Vanbrugh, of course I have nothing to say. I daresay people would think it a very good match."

"With John Darche alive and in the Penitentiary?" inquired the young girl, instantly taking the opposite tack.

"As though any one could care or ask what became of him!" cried Brett, with something like indignation. "Thank heaven we are just in this country! We do not visit the sins of the blackguard upon the innocent woman he leaves behind him. Fortunately, there are no children. The very name will be forgotten, and Mrs. Darche can begin life over again."

"Whoever marries her will have to take old Mr. Darche as an incumbrance," remarked Dolly.

"Of course! Do you suppose that such a woman would leave the poor old gentleman to be taken care of by strangers? Besides, he is a beggar. He has not so much as pocket-money for his cigars. Of course Mr. Darche will stay with them. After all, it will not be so bad. He is very quiet and cheerful, and never in the way."

Brett spoke thoughtfully, in a tone which conveyed to Dolly the certainty that he had already revolved the situation of Marion's future husband in his mind.

"Tell me, Mr. Brett," she said, after a short pause, "will anybody say that she should have sacrificed her own little fortune?"

"People may say it as much as they please," answered the young man quickly. "No one will ever make me believe it."

"I thought conscientious people often did that sort of thing."

"Yes, they do. But this does not seem to me to be a case for that. The bogus certificates of stocks never really were on the market. The first that were issued excited suspicion, and proceedings began almost immediately. Whatever John Darche actually stole was practically taken from the funds of the Company. Now the Company is rich, and it was its own fault if it did not look after its affairs. In some failures, a lot of poor people suffer. That is different. It has fortunately not happened here. The stock will be depreciated for a time, but the Company will continue to exist

and will ultimately hold up its head again. The bonds are good enough. After all, what is stock? Lend me some money at your own risk and if I have anything I will pay you interest. If I have nothing, you get nothing. That is what stock means."

"I know," answered Dolly, whose clear little brain had long been familiar with the meanings of common business terms. "Yes, you are quite right. There is no reason why Marion should give anything of her own."

"None whatever," assented Brett.

If Dolly drew any conclusions from what Brett had said, she kept them to herself, and a long silence followed, which was broken at last by the appearance of Russell Vanbrugh, looking pale and tired. He shook hands in silence and sat down.

"I suppose it is all over?" said Dolly softly, in a tone of interrogation.

"Yes, just as we feared."

"What has he got?" inquired Brett, lowering his voice as though he feared that Marion might overhear him, though she was not in the room.

"Five years."

"Is that all?" asked the younger man almost indignantly.

Vanbrugh smiled faintly at the question.

"I am rather proud of it," he answered, "considering that I defended the case."

"True, I forgot." Brett began to walk up and down again.

Dolly looked at Vanbrugh and nodded to him with a little smile as though in approval of what he had done. He seemed pleased and grateful.

"You must be dreadfully tired," she said. "Do let me give you some tea."

"Thanks — I should like some — but some one ought to tell Mrs. Darche. Shall I? Where is she?"

"I will tell her," said Brett stopping suddenly. "I will send her a message and she will come down to the drawing-room."

He went out, leaving Dolly to comfort Vanbrugh with tea, for he was far too much excited to sit down or to listen to their conversation. The whole matter might be more or less indifferent to them, whose lives could not be affected directly by Mrs. Darche's misfortunes, but he felt

that his own happiness was in the balance. He knew also that, by the arrangements he had made, John Darche would be brought to the house in the course of the next hour, before being taken back to prison for the night, and it was necessary to warn Marion and to see that the old gentleman was prepared to receive his son.

"How about old Mr. Darche?" inquired Dolly, when she and Vanbrugh were left alone.

"Every one is sorry for him," said Vanbrugh, "just as every one execrates John. I get very little credit for the defence," he added, with a dry laugh.

"How good you are!" exclaimed Dolly.

"Am I? It seems to me it was the least I could do."

"It will not seem so to every one," said Dolly.

"I would do a great deal for Mrs. Darche," said Vanbrugh.

"Yes, I know you would. You — you are very fond of her, are you not?" She turned her face away as she asked the question.

"I wish to be a good friend to her."

"And something more?" suggested Dolly, in a tone of interrogation.

"Something more?" repeated Vanbrugh, "I do not understand."

"Oh nothing! I thought you did."

"Perhaps I did. But I think you are mistaken."

"Am I?" Dolly asked, turning her face to him again. "I wish — I mean, I do not think I am."

"I am sure you are."

"This is a good deal like a puzzle game, is it not?"

"No, it is much more serious," said Vanbrugh, speaking gravely. "This is certainly not the time to talk of such things, Miss Maylands. John Darche may come at any moment, and as far as possible his father has been prepared for his coming. But that isn't it. Perhaps I had better say it at once. We have always been such good friends, you know, and I think a great deal of your good opinion, so that I do not wish you to mistake my motives. You evidently think that I am devoted — to say the least of it — to Mrs. Darche. After all, what is the use of choosing words and beat about the bush? You think I am in love with her. I should be very sorry to leave you with that impression — very, very sorry. Do you understand?"

Dolly had glanced at him several times while he had been speaking, but when he finished she looked into the fire again.

"You were in love with her once?" she said quietly.

"Perhaps; how do you know that?"

"She told me so, ever so long ago."

"She told you so?" Vanbrugh's tone betrayed his annoyance.

"Yes. Why are you angry? I am her best friend. Was it not natural that she should tell me?"

"I hardly know."

A pause followed, during which Stubbs entered the room, bringing tea. When he was gone and Dolly had filled Vanbrugh's cup she took up the conversation again.

"Are you thinking about it?" she asked, with a smile.

"About what?" Vanbrugh looked up quickly over his cup.

"Whether it was natural or not?"

"No, I was wondering whether you would still believe it."

"Why should I?" asked Dolly.

"You might. In spite of what I tell you. You know very little of my life."

"Oh, I know a great deal," said the young girl with much conviction. "I know all about you. You are successful, and rich and popular and happy, and lots of things."

"Am I?" asked Vanbrugh rather sadly.

"Yes. Everybody knows you are."

"You are quite sure that I am happy?"

"Unless you tell me that you are not."

"How oddly people judge us," exclaimed Vanbrugh. "Because a man behaves like a human being, and is not cross at every turn, and puts his shoulder to the wheel, to talk and be agreeable in society, everybody thinks he is happy."

"Of course." Dolly smiled. "If you were unhappy you would go and sit in corners by yourself and mope and be disagreeable. But you do not, you see. You are always 'on hand' as they call it, always ready to make things pleasant for everybody."

"That is because I am so good-natured."

"What is good nature?"

"A combination of laziness and vulgarity," Vanbrugh answered promptly.

"Oh!"

"Yes," said Vanbrugh. "The vulgarity that wishes to please everybody, and the laziness that cannot say no."

"You are not a lawyer for nothing. But you are not lazy and you are not vulgar. If you were I should not like you."

"Do you like me?" asked Vanbrugh quickly.

"Very much," she answered with a little laugh.

"You just made me define good nature, Miss Maylands. How do you define liking?"

"Oh, it is very vague," said Dolly in an airy tone. "It is a sort of uncly, auntly thing."

"Oh. I see."

"Do you?"

"Uncles and aunts sometimes marry, do they not?"

"What an idea? They are always brothers and sisters."

"Unless they are uncles and aunts of different people," suggested Vanbrugh.

At this point they were interrupted by the

entrance of Stubbs. That dignified functionary had suffered intensely during the last few days, but his tortures were not yet over. So far as lay in his power he still maintained that absolute correctness of appearance which distinguished him from the common, or hirsute "head man"; but he could not control the colour of his face nor the expression of his eyes. He had been a footman in the house of Marion's father, in that very house in fact, and had completely identified himself with the family. Had he considered that he was in the employment of Simon and John Darche, he would have long since given notice and sought a place better suited to his eminent respectability. But having always waited upon Marion since she had been a little girl, he felt bound by all the tenets of inherited butlerdom — and by a sort of devotion not by any means to be laughed at — to stand by his young mistress through all her troubles. By this time his eyes had a permanently unsettled look in them as though he never knew what fearful sight he might next gaze upon, and the ruddy colour was slowly but certainly sinking to the collar line. It

had already descended to the lower tips of his ears.

"Beg pardon, Miss Maylands," he said in a subdued tone, "beg pardon, sir. Mr. John has come with those gentlemen."

Both Dolly and Vanbrugh started slightly and looked up at him. Vanbrugh was the first to speak.

"Do you not think you had better go away — to Mrs. Darche?" he asked. "She may want to see you for a minute."

Dolly rose and left the room.

"I suppose they will come in here," said Vanbrugh, addressing Stubbs.

"Yes, sir," answered the butler nervously, "they are coming."

"Well — let us make the best of it."

A moment later John Darche entered the room, followed closely by three men, evidently dressed for the occasion, according to superior orders, in what, at police head-quarters, was believed to be the height of the fashion, for they all wore light snuff-coloured overcoats, white ties, dark trousers and heavily-varnished shoes, and each had a per-

fectly new high hat in his hand. They looked about the room with evident curiosity.

Darche himself was deathly pale and had grown thinner. Otherwise he was little changed. As soon as he caught sight of Vanbrugh, he came forward, extending his hand.

"I have not had a chance to thank you for your able defence," he said calmly.

"It is not necessary," answered Vanbrugh coldly, and putting his hands behind him as he leaned against the mantelpiece. "It was a matter of duty."

"Very well," said John Darche stiffly, and drawing back a step. "If you do not want to shake hands we will treat it as a matter of business."

"He is pretty fresh, ain't he?" remarked one of the officers in an undertone to his neighbour.

"You bet he is," answered the other.

"Now I have got to see the old gentleman," said Darche, speaking to Vanbrugh. "Before I go, I would like to have a word with you. There is no objection to my speaking privately to Mr. Vanbrugh, I suppose?" he inquired, turning to the officer.

"Not if you stay in the room," answered the one who took the lead.

Darche nodded to Vanbrugh, who somewhat reluctantly followed him to the other end of the room.

"I say," he began in a tone not to be overheard by the detectives. "Can you not give me another chance?"

"What sort of chance?" replied Vanbrugh, raising his eyebrows.

"If I could get through that door," said John looking over Vanbrugh's shoulder, "I could get away. I know the house and they do not. Presently, when my father comes, if you could create some sort of confusion for a moment, I could slip out. They will never catch me. There is an Italian sailing vessel just clearing. I have had exact information. If I can get through that door I can be in the Sixth Avenue Elevated in three minutes and out of New York Harbour in an hour."

Vanbrugh had no intention of being a party to the escape. He met Darche's eyes coldly as he answered.

"No, I will not do it. I have defended you in open court, but I am not going to help you evade the law."

"Do not be too hard, Vanbrugh," said Darche, in a tone of entreaty. "Things are not half so bad as they are made out."

"If that is true, I am sorry. But you have had a perfectly fair trial."

"Will you not help me get away?" Darche urged knowing that this was his last chance.

"No."

"Vanbrugh," said John in an insinuating tone, "you used to be fond of my wife. You wanted to marry her."

"What has that to do with it?" asked Vanbrugh turning sharply upon him.

"You may marry her and welcome, if you let me get through that door. I shall never be heard of again."

"You infernal scoundrel!" Vanbrugh was thoroughly disgusted. "Now gentlemen," he said, turning to the officer in charge, "I will bring Mr. Darche here to see his son. I am sure that for the old gentleman's sake, out of mere humanity,

you will do the best you can to keep up the illusion we have arranged. He is old and his mind wanders. He will scarcely notice your presence."

"Yes, sir," the man answered. "You may trust us to do that, sir. Now then, boys," he said, addressing his two companions, "straighten up, best company manners, stiff upper lip — keep your eye on the young man. He is rather too near that door for my taste."

John Darche's face expressed humiliation and something almost approaching to despair. He was about to make another attempt, and had moved a step towards Vanbrugh, when he suddenly started a little and stood still. Marion stood in the open door beyond three detectives. She touched one of them on the shoulder as a sign that she wished to pass.

"Pardon me, lady," said the man, drawing back. "Anything that we can do for you?"

"I am Mrs. Darche. I wish to speak to my husband."

"Certainly, madam," and all three made way for her.

She went straight to her husband, and stood before him at the other end of the room, speaking in a low voice.

"Is there anything I can do for you, John?" she asked so that he could barely hear her.

"You can help me to get away—if you will." John Darche's eyes fell before hers.

She gazed at him during several seconds, hesitating, perhaps, between her sense of justice and her desire to be faithful to her husband to the very end.

"Yes, I will," she said briefly.

Before she spoke again she turned quite naturally, as though in hesitation, and satisfied herself that the three men were out of hearing. Vanbrugh, perhaps suspecting what was taking place, had engaged them in conversation near the door.

"How?" she asked, looking at John again. "Tell me quickly."

"Presently, when my father comes, get as many people as you can. Let me be alone for a moment. Make some confusion, upset something, anything will do. Give me a chance to get through the door into the library."

"I will try. Is that all?"

"Thank you," said John Darche, and for one moment a look of something like genuine gratitude passed over his hard face. "Yes, that is all. You will be glad to get rid of me."

Marion looked one moment longer, hesitated, said nothing and turned away.

"If you have no objections," said Vanbrugh addressing the officer in charge, "we will take Mr. Darche to his father's room instead of asking him to come here."

"Yes, sir," answered the detective. "We can do that."

As they were about to leave the room, Brett met them at the door. He paused a moment and looked about. Then he went straight to Vanbrugh.

"Has he seen him yet?" he asked.

"No, we are just going," answered Vanbrugh.

"Can I be of any use?"

"Stay with Mrs. Darche."

"Shall we go?" he asked, turning to John.

"How brave you are!" exclaimed Brett when they were alone.

"Does it need much courage?" asked Marion, sinking into a chair. "I do not know. Perhaps."

"I know that there are not many men who could bear all this as well as you do," Brett answered, and there was a little emotion in his face.

"Men are different. Mr. Brett—" she began after a short pause.

"Yes, do you want to ask me something?"

"Yes, something that is very hard to ask. Something that you will refuse."

"That would be hard indeed."

"Will you promise not to be angry?" asked Marion faintly.

"Of course I will," Brett answered.

"Do not be so sure. Men's honour is such a strange thing. You may think what I am going to ask touches it."

"What is it?"

He sat down beside her and prepared to listen.

"Will you help my husband to escape?" asked Marion in a whisper. "No—do not say it. Wait until I tell you first how it can be done. Presently I will get them all into this room. Old Mr.

Darche is too ill to come, I am afraid. You have not spoken alone to John yet. Take him aside and bring him close to this door on pretence of exchanging a few words. I will make a diversion of some sort at the other end of the room and as they all look round he can slip out. If he has one minute's start they will never see him again. Will you do it?"

"You were right," said Brett gravely. "It is a hard thing to ask."

"Will you do it?"

"It is criminal," he answered.

"Will you do it?"

"For God's sake, give me time to think!" He passed his hand over his eyes.

"There is no time," said Marion anxiously. "Will you do it for me?"

"How can I? how can I?"

"You told me that you loved me the other day — will you do it for my sake?"

A change came over Brett's face.

"For your sake?" he asked in an altered tone. "Do you mean it?"

"Yes. For my sake."

"Very well. I will do it." He turned a little pale and closed one hand over the other.

"Thank you — thank you, Harry." Her voice lingered a little, as she pronounced his name. "Stay here. I will make them come. It is of no use to leave them there. It is a mere formality, at best."

"I am ready," said Brett, rising.

Marion left her seat, and crossing the room again tried the door in question to satisfy herself that it would open readily. She looked out into the passage beyond and then came back, and passing Brett without a word left the room.

She was not gone long, and during the minutes of her absence Brett tried hard not to think of what he was going to do. He could not but be aware that it was a desperately serious matter to help a convicted criminal to escape. He thought of the expression he had seen on Marion's face when he had promised to do it, and of the soft intonation of her sweet voice, and he tried to think of nothing else.

In a moment more she was in the room again leading old Mr. Darche forward, his arm linked

in hers. John came in on his father's other side, while Vanbrugh and the three officers followed.

"I understand, I understand, my boy," cried old Darche in his cheery voice. "It is a grand thing."

John was very pale as he answered, and was evidently making a great effort to speak lightly.

"Yes, of course. It has turned out much simpler than we expected, however, thanks to your immense reputation, father. Without your name we could not have done it, could we, gentlemen?" he asked, turning to the detectives as though appealing to them.

"No, guess not," answered the three together.

"Good God, what a scene!" exclaimed Brett under his breath.

"Mr. Brett," said Marion approaching him. "You said you wanted to speak to my husband. Now you must tell me all about it, father," she continued, drawing the old gentleman towards the fire. "I do not half understand in all this confusion."

"Why it is as plain as day, child," said [illegible] Darche, ever ready to explain a

"The second mortgage of a million and a half to square everything. Come here, come close to the fire, my hands are cold. I think I must have been ill."

"You would never think Mr. Darche had been ill, would you, gentlemen?" asked Marion, appealing again to the detectives.

"No, guess not," they answered in chorus.

Meanwhile Brett led Darche across the room, talking to him in a loud tone until they were near the door.

"Your wife will make some diversion presently," he whispered. "I do not know how. When she does, make for that door and get out."

"Thank you, thank you," said John with genuine fervour, and his face lighted up. "God bless you, Brett!"

"Do not thank me," answered Brett roughly. "I do not want to do it. Thank your wife."

"Oh!" exclaimed John Darche, and his eyelids contracted. "My wife! Is it for her?"

"Yes."

"I will remember that. I will remember it as long as I live."

Brett never forgot the look which accompanied the words.

"Well, be grateful to her anyhow," he said.

At that moment a piercing scream rang through the room. Marion Darche, while talking to her father-in-law, had been standing quite close to the fire. When Brett turned his head the front of her dress was burning with a slow flame and she was making desperate efforts to tear it from her.

"Good Heavens, you are really burning!" cried Brett as he crushed the flaming stuff with his bare hands, regardless of the consequences to himself.

"Did you think that I cried out in fun?" asked Marion calmly.

On hearing his wife's cry John Darche had bestowed but one glance upon her. It mattered but little to him that she was really on fire. The detectives had rushed to her assistance and for one moment no one was looking. He was close to the door. A moment later he had left the room and turned the key behind him.

"My God!" exclaimed the officer in charge, suddenly. "He has gone! Run, boys! Stop! One of you take the old one. We will not lose them both."

Old Darche started as though he had suddenly been waked out of a deep sleep, and his voice rang out loud and clear.

"Hey, what is this?" he cried. "Hello! Detectives in my house? Disguised too?"

"Yes, sir," answered one of the detectives, seizing him by the wrist just as the other two left the room in pursuit of John Darche. "And one of them has got you."

"Got me!" roared the old man. "Hands off, there! What do you mean? Damn you, sir, let me go!"

"Oh, well," replied the officer calmly, "if you are going to take on like that, you may just as well know that your son was tried and convicted for forgery to-day. Not that I believe that you had anything to do with it, but he is a precious rascal all the same, and has escaped from your house —"

"I! Forgery The man is mad! John, where are you? Brett! Vanbrugh! Help me, gentlemen!"

He appealed to Brett, and then to Vanbrugh who, indeed, was doing his best to draw the officer away.

"No, no," answered the latter firmly. "I've got one of them — it's all in the family."

Though Marion's dress was still smouldering and Brett was on his knees trying to extinguish the last spark with his own hands, she forgot her own danger, and almost tearing herself away from Brett she clasped the policeman's hand trying to drag it from Simon Darche's shoulder.

"Oh, sir," she cried in tearful entreaty, "pray let him go! He is innocent — he is ill! He will not think of escaping. Don't you see that we have kept it all from him?"

"Kept it all from me?" asked the old gentleman fiercely turning upon her. "What do you mean? Where is John? Where is John? I say!"

"In handcuffs by this time I guess," said the detective calmly.

"But I insist upon knowing what all this means," continued old Darche, growing more and more excited, while the veins of his temples swelled to bursting. "Forgery! Trial! Conviction! John escaping! Am I dreaming? Are not you three directors of the other road? Good God,

young man, speak!" He seized Brett by the collar in his excitement.

"Pray be calm, sir, pray be calm," answered the young man, trying to loosen the policeman's sturdy grasp.

By a tremendous effort, such as madmen make in supreme moments, the old man broke loose, and seizing Marion by the wrist dragged her half across the room while he spoke. "Tell me this thing is all a lie!" he cried, again and again.

"The lady knows the truth well enough, sir," said the policeman, coming up behind him. "She caught fire just right."

For one moment Simon Darche stood upright in the middle of the room, looking from one to the other with wild frightened eyes.

"Oh, it is true!" he cried in accents of supreme agony. "John has disgraced himself! Oh, my son, my son!"

One instant more, and the light in his eyes broke, he threw out his arms and fell straight backwards against the detective. Simon Darche was dead.

CHAPTER VIII.

THERE was no lack of sympathy for Marion Darche, and it was shown in many ways during the period of calm which succeeded her husband's disappearance and the sudden death of his father. Every one was anxious to be first in showing the lonely woman that she was not alone, but that, on the contrary, those who had been her friends formerly were more ready than ever to proclaim the fact now, and, so far as they were able, not in words only, but in deeds also.

She was relieved, all at once, of the many burdens which had oppressed her life during the past years — indeed, she sometimes caught herself missing the constant sacrifice, the daily effort of subduing her temper, the hourly care for the doting old man who was gone.

But with all this, there was the consciousness that she was not altogether free. Somewhere in the world, John Darche was still alive, a fugitive,

a man for whose escape a reward was offered. It was worse than widowhood to be bound to a husband who was socially dead. It would have been easier to bear if he had never escaped, and if he were simply confined in the Penitentiary. There would not have been the danger of his coming back stealthily by night, which Marion felt was not imaginary so long as he was at large.

Yet she made no effort to obtain a divorce from the man whose name was a disgrace. On the contrary, so far as outward appearances were concerned, she made no change, or very little, in her life. Public opinion had been with her from the first, and society chose to treat her as a young widow, deserving every sympathy, who when the time of mourning should have expired, would return to the world, and open her doors to it.

There was a great deal of speculation as to the reasons which prevented her from taking steps to free herself, but no one guessed what really passed in her mind, any more than the majority of her acquaintances understood that she had once loved John Darche. It had been commonly said for

years that she had married him out of disappointment because something had prevented her from marrying another man, usually supposed to have been Russell Vanbrugh. People attributed to her a greater complication of motives than she could have believed possible.

In order not to be altogether alone, she took a widowed cousin to live with her — a Mrs. Willoughby, who soon became known to her more intimate friends as Cousin Annie. She was a gray, colourless woman, much older than Marion, kind of heart but not very wise, insignificant but refined, a moral satisfaction and an intellectual disappointment, accustomed to the world, but not understanding it, good by nature and charitable, and educated in religious forms to which she clung by habit and association rather than because they represented anything to her. Cousin Annie was one of those fortunate beings whom temptation overlooks, passing by on the other side, who can suffer in a way for the loss of those dear to them, but whose mourning does not reach the dignity of sorrow, nor the selfish power of grief.

Marion did not feel the need of a more complicated and gifted individuality for companionship. On the contrary, it was a relief to her to have some one at her side for whom she was not expected to think, but who, on the contrary, thought for her in all the commonplace matters of life, and never acted otherwise than as a normal, natural, human unit. There had been enough of the unusual in the house in Lexington Avenue, and Marion was glad that it was gone.

Three months passed in this way and the spring was far advanced. Then, suddenly and without warning, came the news that John Darche had been heard of, traced, seen at last and almost captured. He had escaped once more and this time he had escaped, for ever, by his own act. He had jumped overboard in the English Channel from the Calais boat, and his body had not been found.

Mrs. Darche wore black for her husband, and Cousin Annie said it was very becoming. Dolly Maylands thought it absurd to put on even the appearance of mourning for such a creature, and said so.

"My dear child," answered Marion gently, "he was my husband."

"I never can realise it," said Dolly. "Do you remember, I used to ask you if you did not sometimes forget it yourself?"

"I never forgot it." Mrs. Darche's voice had a wonderful gravity in it, without the least sadness. She was a woman without affectation.

"No," said Dolly thoughtfully, "I suppose you never had a chance. It is of no use, Marion dear," she added after a little pause, and in a different tone, as though she were tired of pretending a sort of subdued sympathy, "it is of no use at all! I can never be sorry, you know — so that ends it. Why, just think! You are free to marry any one you please, to begin life over again. How many women in your position ever had such a chance? Not but what you would have been just as free if you had got a divorce. But — somehow, this is much more solidly satisfactory. Yes, I know — it is horrid and unchristian — but there is just that — there is a solid satisfaction in —"

She was going to say "in death," but thought better of it and checked herself.

"It will not make very much difference to me just yet," said Marion. "Meanwhile, as I said, he was my husband. I shall wear mourning a short time, and then — then I do not know what I shall do."

"It must be very strange," answered Dolly.

"What, child?"

"Your life. Now you need not call me child in that auntly tone, as though you were five hundred thousand years older and wiser and duller than I am. There are not six years between our ages, you know."

"Do not resent being young, Dolly."

"Resent it! No, indeed! I resent your way of making yourself out to be old. In the pages of future history we shall be spoken of as contemporaries."

Mrs. Darche smiled, and Dolly laughed.

"School-book style," said the girl. "That is my morning manner. In the evening I am quite different, thank goodness! But to go back — what I meant was that your own life must seem very strange to you. To have loved really — of course you did — why should you deny it? And

then to have made the great mistake and to have married the wrong man, and to have been good and to have put up the shutters of propriety and virtue — so to say, and to have kept up a sort of Sunday-go-to-meeting myth for years, expecting to do it for the rest of your life, and then — to have the luck — well, no, I did not mean to put it that way — but to begin life all over again, and the man you loved not married yet, and just as anxious to marry you as ever — "

"Stop, Dolly! How do you know?" Marion knit her brows in annoyance.

"Oh! I know nothing, of course. I can only guess. But then, it is easy to guess, sometimes."

"I am not so sure," answered Marion thoughtfully, and looking at Dolly with some curiosity.

As for Brett, he said nothing to any one, when the news of John Darche's death reached New York. He supposed that people would take it for granted that in the course of time he would marry Marion, because the world knew that he had formerly loved her, and that she had made a mistake in not accepting him and would probably be quite willing to rectify it now that she

was free. There had always been a certain amount of inoffensive chaff about his devotion to her interests. But he himself was very far from assuming that she would take him now. He knew her better than the world did, and understood the unexpected hesitations and revulsions of which she was capable, much better than the world could.

He took a hopeful view, however, as was natural. For the present he waited and said nothing. If she chose to go through the form of mourning, he would go through the form of respecting it while it lasted. Society is the better for most of its conventionalities, a fact of which one may easily assure oneself by spending a little time in circles that make bold to laugh at appearances. A man may break the social barriers for a great object's sake, or out of true passion — as sheer necessity may force a man to sleep by the road side. But a man who habitually makes his bed in the gutter by choice is a madman, and one who thinks himself above manners and conventionalities is generally a fool. There is nothing more intolerable than eccen-

tricity for its own sake, nor more pitiful than the perpetual acting of it to a gallery that will not applaud.

For some time Brett continued to come and see Marion regularly, and she did not hesitate to show him that he was as welcome as ever. Then, without any apparent cause, his manner changed. He became much more grave than he had ever been before, and those who knew him well were struck by an alteration in his appearance, not easily defined at first, but soon visible to any one. He was growing pale and thin.

Vanbrugh strolled into his office on a warm day in early June and sat down for a chat. Brett's inner sanctum was in the Equitable Building, measured twelve feet by eight, and was furnished so as to leave a space of about six feet by four in the middle, just enough for two chairs and the legs of the people who sat in them. Vanbrugh looked at his friend and came to the just conclusion that something was materially wrong with him.

"Brett," he said, suddenly, "let us run over to Paris."

"I cannot leave New York at present," Brett answered, without hesitation, as though he had already considered the question of going abroad.

"Not being able to leave New York is a more or less dangerous disease which kills a great many people," observed Vanbrugh. "You must leave New York, whether you can or not. I do not know whether you are ill or not, but you look like an imperfectly boiled owl."

"I know I do. I want a change."

"Then come along."

"No, I cannot leave New York. I am not joking, my dear fellow."

"I see you are not. I suppose it is of no use to ask what is the matter. If you wanted help you would say so. You evidently have something on your mind. Anything I can do?"

"No, I wish there were. I will tell you some day. It is something rather odd and unusual."

Brett was not an imaginative man, or Vanbrugh, judging from his appearance and manner, would almost have suspected that he was suffering from some persecution not quite natural or earthly. He had the uneasy glance of a man who fancies

himself haunted by a sight he fears to see. Vanbrugh looked at him a long time in silence and then rose to go.

"I am sorry, old man," he said, with something almost like a sigh. "You live too much alone," he added, turning as he was about to open the door. "You ought to get married."

Brett smiled in rather a ghastly fashion which did not escape his friend.

"I cannot leave New York," he repeated mechanically.

"Perhaps you will before long," said Vanbrugh, going out. "I would if I were you."

He went away in considerable perplexity. Something in Brett's manner puzzled him and almost frightened him. As a lawyer, and one accustomed to dealing with the worst side of human nature, he was inclined to play the detective for a time; as a friend, he resolved not to inquire too closely into a matter which did not concern him. In fact, he had already gone further than he had intended. Only a refined nature can understand the depth of degradation to which curiosity can reduce friendship.

A day or two later Vanbrugh met Dolly Maylands at a house in Tuxedo Park where he had come to dine and spend the night. There were enough people at the dinner to insure a little privacy to those who had anything to say to one another.

"Brett is ill," said Vanbrugh. "Do you know what is the matter with him?"

"I suppose Marion has refused him after all," answered Dolly, looking at her plate.

Vanbrugh glanced at her face and thought she was a little pale. He remembered the conversation when they had been left together in the library after John Darche's trial, and was glad that he had then spoken cautiously, for he connected her change of colour with himself, by a roundabout and complicated reasoning more easy to be understood than to explain.

"Perhaps she has," he said coolly. "But I do not think it is probable."

"Mr. Brett does not go to see her any more."

"Really? Are you sure of that, Miss Maylands?"

"Marion has noticed it. She spoke to me of it yesterday. I wondered —"

"What?"

"Whether there had been any misunderstanding. I suppose that is what I was going to say." She blushed quickly, as she had turned pale a moment before. "You see," she continued rather hurriedly, "people who have once misunderstood one another may do the same thing again. Say, for instance, that he vaguely hinted at marriage — men have such vague ways of proposing — "

"Have they?"

"Of course — and that Marion did not quite realise what he meant, and turned the conversation, and that Mr. Brett took that for a refusal and went away, and lost his appetite, and all that — would it not account for it?"

"Yes," assented Vanbrugh with a smile. "It might account for it — though Harry Brett is not a school girl of sixteen."

"Meaning that I am, I suppose," retorted Dolly, anxious to get away from the subject which she had not chosen, and to lead Vanbrugh up to what she would have called the chaffing point. But he was not in the humour for that.

"No," he said quietly. "I did not mean that." And he relapsed into silence for a time.

He was thinking the matter over, and he was also asking himself whether, after all, he should not ask Dolly Maylands to marry him, though he was so much older than she. That was a possibility which had presented itself to his mind very often of late, and from time to time he determined to solve the question in one way or the other, and be done with it. But when he wished to decide it, he found it capable of only two answers; either he must offer himself or not. Sometimes he thought he would and then he fancied that he ought to prepare Dolly for so grave a matter by giving up chaff when they were together. But the first attempt at putting this resolution into practice was a failure whenever he tried it. Chaff was Dolly's element,—she pined when she was deprived of it. The serious part of her nature lay deep, and there were treasures there, hidden far below the bright tide of rippling laughter. Such treasures are sometimes lost altogether because no one discovers them, or because no one knows how to bring them to the surface.

As he sat by her side in silence, Vanbrugh was

impelled to turn suddenly upon Dolly and ask her to marry him, without further diplomacy. But he reflected upon the proverbial uncertainty of woman's temper and held his peace. He had never made love to her, and there had never been anything approaching to a show of sentiment between them until that memorable afternoon when the trial was over. Moreover Russell Vanbrugh was a very comfortable man. Nothing less grammatically incorrect could express the combination of pleasant things which made up his life. He was not lonely, in his father's house — indeed, he was not lonely anywhere. He was contented, rich enough to satisfy all his tastes, popular in a certain degree among those he liked, peaceful, never bored, occupying, as it were, a well upholstered stall at the world's play, when he chose to be idle, and busy with matters in which he took a healthy, enduring interest when he chose to work. To marry would be to step into an unknown country. He meant to make the venture some day, but he had just enough of indolence in his character to render the first effort a little distasteful. Nevertheless, he was conscious that he

thought more and more of Dolly, and that he was, in fact, falling seriously in love with her, and foreseeing that there was to be a change in their relations, there arose the doubt, natural in a man not over-vain, as to the reception he might expect at her hands.

When Dolly next saw Marion Darche she proceeded to attack the question in her own way. Marion was still in town, hesitating as to what she should do with her summer. She had no house in the country. The place which had belonged to her husband had gone with such little property as he had still owned at the time of his conviction to repair some of the harm he had done.

The windows of the library were open, and a soft south-easterly breeze was blowing up from the square bringing a breath of coming summer from the park leaves. Those who love New York, even to the smell of its mud, know the strange charm of its days and evenings in late spring. Like the charm of woman, the charm of certain great cities can never be explained by those who feel it to those who do not. There

were flowers in the library, and Dolly sat down near the windows and breathed the sweet quiet air before she spoke.

"Harry Brett is ill," she said.

"Ill? Seriously?" Marion had started slightly at the news.

"Not ill at home," explained Dolly. "Mr. Vanbrugh spoke of it the other night."

"Oh—" Marion seemed relieved. "Perhaps that is the reason why he does not come to see me," she added rather inconsequently, after a moment's pause.

Dolly turned in her seat and looked into her friend's eyes.

"Marion," she said gravely. "You know that is not the reason why he does not come."

"I know? What do you mean, Dolly?"

In spite of the genuine and innocent surprise in the tone, Dolly was not satisfied.

"He has asked you to marry him and you have refused him," she said with conviction.

"I?"

For a moment Marion Darche stared in amazement. Then her eyes filled with tears and she

turned away suddenly. Her voice was unsteady as she answered.

"No. He has not asked me to marry him."

"Are you quite sure, dear?" insisted Dolly. "You know men have such odd ways of saying it, and sometimes one does not quite understand — and then a word, or a glance — if a man is very sensitive — you know — "

"Do not talk like that," said Marion, a little abruptly.

A short silence followed, during which she moved uneasily about the room, touching the objects on the table, though they needed no arrangement. At last she spoke again, out of the dusk from the corner she had reached in her peregrination.

"If he asked me to marry him, I should accept him," she said in a low voice.

Dolly was silent in her turn. She had not expected a direct confidence so soon, and had not at all foreseen its nature, when it came almost unasked.

"It is very strange!" she exclaimed at last.

"Yes," echoed Marion Darche, quite simply. "It is very strange."

It was long before the mystery was solved, and Dolly did not refer to it in the meantime. Brett did not go abroad, nor did he leave New York for more than a few days during the summer, though it was almost inconceivable that his business should require his constant presence during the dull season, and he could certainly have left matters to his partner, had he not had some very good reason for refusing to take a holiday.

Mrs. Darche took Cousin Annie with her and wandered about during a couple of months, visiting various places which did not interest her, falling in with acquaintances often, and sometimes with friends, but rather avoiding those she met than showing any wish to see much of them.

To tell the truth, the great majority showed no inclination to intrude upon her privacy. People understood well enough that she should desire to be alone and undisturbed, considering the strange circumstances through which she had passed during the winter and spring. Moreover Brett's conduct elicited approval on all sides. It was said that he showed good taste in not following

Mrs. Darche from place to place, as he might easily have done, and as most men in his position undoubtedly would have done, for it was quite clear that he was seriously in love. All his friends had noticed the change of appearance and manner, and others besides Vanbrugh had advised him to take a rest, to go abroad, to go and shoot bears, in short, to do one of the many things which are generally supposed to contribute to health and peace of mind. Then it was rumoured that he was working harder than usual, in view of his approaching marriage, that he was not so well off as had generally been supposed, and that he wished to forestall any remarks to the effect that he was going to marry Mrs. Darche for the sake of her fortune, which was considerable. In short, people said everything they could think of, and all the things that are usually thought of in such cases, and when they had reached the end of their afflictions they talked of other friends whose doings formed a subject of common interest.

Mrs. Darche did not find much companionship in her cousin, but that was not exactly what she required or expected of Mrs. Willoughby. She

wanted the gray, colourless atmosphere which the widowed lady seemed to take about with her, and she liked it merely because it was neutral, restful and thoroughly unemotional. She did not think of creating new diversions for herself, nor of taking up new interests. Her life had been so full that this temporary emptiness was restful to her. She was surprised at finding how little the present resembled what she had expected it to be, so long as it had been still a future. As yet, too, there was an element of uncertainty in it which did not preclude pleasant reflections. Though she had said to Dolly that Brett's conduct was changed, she could still explain it to herself well enough to be satisfied with her own conclusions. Doubtless he felt that it was yet too soon to speak or even to show by his actions that he had anything to say. She could well believe — and indeed it was flattering — that he abstained from seeing her because he felt that in her presence he might not be able to control his speech. She called up in her memory what had taken place many months previously when she had sent for him and had told him that she needed a large sum of money at

short notice — how he had lost his head on that occasion, and allowed words to break out which both of them had regretted. Since there was now no obstacle in the way, it would of course be harder for him than ever to act the part of a disinterested friend, even for the short time — the shortest possible — during which she went through the form of wearing mourning for John Darche. She could still say to herself that it was delicate and tactful on Brett's part to act as he was acting, although she sometimes thought, or wished, that he might have allowed what was passing in his mind to betray itself by a glance, a gesture or a gentle intonation. It was certainly pushing the proprieties to the utmost to keep away from her altogether. Even when he wrote to her, as he had occasion to do several times during the summer, he confined himself almost entirely to matters of business, and the little phrase with which he concluded each of his communications seemed to grow more and more formal. There had always been something a little exaggerated in Harry Brett's behaviour. It had been that perhaps, which in old times had frightened her, had

prevented her from accepting him, and had made her turn in mistaken confidence to the man of grave moderation and apparently unchanging purpose who had become her husband.

Dolly Maylands had no such illusions with regard to Brett's conduct, though she did not again discuss the matter with Russell Vanbrugh. She was conscious that he felt as she did, that something mysterious had taken place about which neither of them knew anything, but which was seriously and permanently influencing Harry Brett's life. Dolly, however, was more discreet than was commonly supposed, and kept her surmises to herself. When Mrs. Darche and Brett were discussed before her, she said as little as she could, and allowed people to believe that she shared the common opinion, namely, that the two people would be married before the year was out and that, in the meanwhile, both were behaving admirably.

Vanbrugh wandered about a good deal during the summer, returning to New York from time to time, more out of habit than necessity. He made visits at various country houses among his

friends, spent several days on board of several yachts, was seen more than once in Bar Harbour, and once, at least, at Newport and on the whole did all those things which are generally expected of a successful man in the summer holidays. He wrote to Brett several times, but they did not meet often. The tone of his friend's letters tended to confirm his suspicion of some secret trouble. Brett wrote in a nervous and detached way and often complained of the heat and discomfort during July and August, though he never gave a sufficient reason for staying where he was.

On the other hand, Vanbrugh found that where he was invited Dolly Maylands was often invited too, and that there seemed to be a general impression that they liked one another's society and should be placed together at dinner.

More than once, Vanbrugh felt again the strong impulse to which he had almost yielded at Tuxedo. More than once he made a serious attempt to change the tone of his conversation with Dolly. She did not fail to notice this, of course, and being slightly embarrassed generally became grave and silent on such occasions, thereby lead-

ing Vanbrugh to suppose that she was bored, which very much surprised the successful man of the world at first and very much annoyed him afterwards.

So the summer passed away, and all concerned in this little story were several months older if not proportionately wiser.

CHAPTER IX.

In the autumn, Marion Darche returned to town, feeling that since she was to begin life over again, and since her friends had accepted the fact, there was no reason for not taking the first steps at once. She intended to live very quietly, occupying herself as best she could, for she knew that some occupation was necessary to her, now that the whole busy existence of the last five years was over. She did not know what to do. She consulted Dolly, and would have liked to consult Brett, but he rarely called, and then, by design or coincidence, he always seemed to appear just when some one else was with her.

More than once she had thought of writing to him freely, asking him to explain the cause of his conduct and to put an end to the estrangement which was growing up between them. She even went so far as to begin a letter, but it was never finished and found its way to the fire

before it was half written. She could not, however, keep her thoughts from dwelling on him, since there was no longer any reason for trying to forget his existence. She was not lacking in pride, and if she had believed that Harry Brett no longer loved her, she would have still been strong enough to bury the memory of him out of sight and beyond danger of resurrection. But he did not behave in such a way as to convince her of that. A woman's instinct is rarely wrong in telling her whether she is loved or not, unless she is confronted with a man of superior wickedness or goodness. The strength which breeds great virtues and great vices lends that perfect control of outward manner which is called diabolical or heroic according to circumstances. Harry Brett was not such a man. He could keep away from the house in Lexington Avenue, because for some reason or other he believed it necessary to avoid Mrs. Darche's society; but he could not simulate what he did not feel, nor conceal his real feelings when he was with her. The cold, nervous hand, the quick glance, the momentary hesitation, the choice of a seat a little too

far from her side — all told Marion that he loved her still, and that he believed himself obliged to stay away, and was afraid to be alone with her.

At last she made up her mind to do something which should show him definitely that she now regarded her mourning as a mere formality, and intended before long to return to her former way of living, as though nothing had happened. She determined to ask Brett and Vanbrugh and Dolly to luncheon. It certainly was not a very wild dissipation which she proposed, but it was the first time she had invited more than one of them at the same time. And cousin Annie Willoughby petitioned for a fourth guest by a very gentle and neutral hint. She had a certain elderly friend, one James Brown, who was the only person living who seemed able to talk to her for any length of time.

Mr. Brown had been a disappointment to his friends in his youth. He was regarded as a failure. Great things had been expected of him when he left college and during several years afterwards. But his so-called gifts had turned out to be only tastes, and he had never accom-

plished anything. He had not the enthusiastic, all-devouring, all-appreciative, omnivorous nature which makes some amateurs delightful companions and invaluable flatterers. Though he really knew something about several subjects no one ever had the slightest respect for his opinion or judgment. He was an agreeable man, a good-natured gossip, a harmless critic. He always seemed to have read every word of books which most people found tiresome and skimmed in half an hour, and he never was acquainted with the book of the hour until the hour was past. No one ever understood why he liked Mrs. Willoughby, nor why she liked him, but if people thought of the matter at all they thought the friendship very appropriate. Mr. Brown knew everybody in society and was useful in filling a place, because he was a bachelor, and joined in the hum if not in the conversation. In appearance he was a bald man with refined features, a fair beard turning gray, gentle blue eyes, an average figure, small feet and hands, well-made clothes, a chronic watch-chain and a ring with an intaglio. His strong point was his

memory, his weak point was his absence of tact.

Marion, who intended that the general conversation of the table should be followed by a general pairing off after the coffee, reflected that Mr. Brown would amuse Mrs. Willoughby while Vanbrugh talked to Dolly and she herself had an opportunity of speaking with Brett. So she asked Mr. Brown to join the party, and he accepted. Dolly came first, but Mr. Brown, who was punctuality itself, appeared a moment later. Vanbrugh arrived next, and last of all. Harry Brett, a little late and apologising rather nervously.

"Did you get my note?" he inquired of Vanbrugh, after the first greetings and as soon as he could exchange a word with him, unnoticed in the general conversation.

"No. Anything important? I went out early — before eleven o'clock, and have not been at home since."

"There was an interesting story of a wreck in the paper this morning," said Mr. Brown, addressing the three ladies.

"Stop him," said Brett to Vanbrugh in an

energetic whisper. "Now Brown, my dear fellow," he continued aloud, sitting down beside Mrs. Darche, "do not begin the day by giving us the Sunday Herald entire, because we have all read it and we know all about the wreck —"

Mr. Brown, who was used to interruption and to being checked when he was about to bore people, looked up with mild eyes and protested a little.

"I say, Brett, you know, you are rather abrupt sometimes, in your way of shutting people up. But as you say, they have probably all read the story. I only thought —"

"Only thought!" cried Vanbrugh, taking his cue from his friend. "Only! As though thinking were not the most important function of the human animal, next to luncheon —"

"I have not read the story Mr. Brown alludes to," observed Mrs. Willoughby rather primly.

"Oh — it is all about natural history, and cannibals and latitudes and people in a boat," said Brett talking very fast. "All that kind of thing. As for the news I can give you lots of it. Great fire, strike, a new bacillus in postage-

stamp gum — awfully dangerous, Mrs. Willoughby. Always use a sponge for moistening your stamps or you will get something — some sort of new disease — what is it, Vanbrugh? You always know everything."

"Gum-boils," suggested Vanbrugh, without hesitation.

Brett gave him a grateful look, as Mr. Brown's laughter assured him that the danger was over for the present. But Brett did not desist until Stubbs opened the dining-room door and they all went in to luncheon. Mrs. Darche watched him curiously, wondering what was the matter. She had never before heard him talk so nervously. Vanbrugh had not the slightest idea of what had happened, but blindly followed Brett's lead, and helped him to annihilate Mr. Brown whenever the latter showed the least inclination to tell a story.

Mr. Brown, however, was an obstinate person. He was not quick on his feet mentally, so to say, and an insignificant idea had as strong a hold upon his thoughts as an important one. Somehow he managed to tell the tale of the wreck to

Mrs. Willoughby and Dolly in the little shifting of companionship which always takes place on leaving table. To do him justice, he told it very shortly, and Mrs. Darche did not chance to be listening at the time. Stubbs was offering everybody coffee, and Marion had a box of cigarettes and was standing before the fireplace with Vanbrugh and Brett, exchanging a few words with the latter. Suddenly Mr. Brown's voice rose above the rest.

"Of course," he was saying, "nobody ever knew positively that the man had really been drowned. But he had never turned up—"

"And probably never will," answered Dolly, glancing nervously at Marion. But she had caught the words and had turned a little pale.

Vanbrugh looked over to Brown.

"For heaven's sake, Jim," he said, in a low voice. "Talk about something else, if you must, you know!"

Mr. Brown's face fell as he realised his mistake.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "Just like me! I forgot that poor Darche drowned himself."

Marion recovered herself quickly and came

forward, offering her box of cigarettes to everybody, while Brett carried the little silver spirit lamp.

"You must all smoke and make yourselves happy," she said with a smile. "Cousin Annie does not mind it in the least."

"Well, of course," began Mrs. Willoughby, primly polite, "nowadays —"

"There is nobody like you, Mrs. Darche," said Vanbrugh, accepting the offer. "Thanks."

"They are your especial kind," answered Marion.

"I know they are — that is what I mean. How you spoil me!"

Marion went on.

"Mr. Brown?"

"Yes, thank you. I do smoke sometimes," answered Mr. Brown, hesitating in the matter between his allegiance to Mrs. Willoughby, who disapproved of smoking in the drawing-room, and his duty to his hostess, who encouraged it.

"I hope you always do," said Marion. "When a man does not smoke — Mr. Brett, take one."

She had stopped herself, remembering that her husband had not been a smoker, but Mr. Brown finished the sentence for her with his usual tact.

"Yes," he said, lighting his cigarette, "men who do not smoke always seem to me to be suspicious characters."

"Dolly, try one," said Marion, trying not to hear him.

"Oh, Marion!" Dolly laughed.

"Try it," said Vanbrugh, sitting down beside her.

The party had paired off, and Marion found herself near the window with Brett, beside a table covered with photographs and etchings.

"I wonder why Miss Maylands should seem shocked," began Brett, entering into conversation rather awkwardly. "I have no doubt that she, and you, and perhaps Mrs. Willoughby, have all tried a cigarette in secret, and perhaps you have liked it?"

"If I liked cigarettes I would smoke them," said Mrs. Darche, with decision.

"Do you always do what you like?"

"In little things."

"And how about the big things?" inquired Brett.

"I like to have other people take care of them for me."

"What people?" As he asked the question he absently took a photograph from the table and looked at it.

"People who know me," said Marion.

"Meaning me?"

"If you like."

"If I like!" exclaimed Brett. Then, having broken the ice, as it were, his voice suddenly changed. "There is nothing I like so much, there is nothing I would rather do than take care of you and what belongs to you."

"You have shown it," answered Mrs. Darche gently. She took the photograph from Brett's hand and looked at it, in her turn, without seeing it.

"I have tried to, once or twice," said Brett, "when you needed help."

"Indeed you have. And you know that I am grateful too."

"I do not care to know that," he replied. "If I ever did anything for you — it was only what any other man would have done in my place — it was not for the sake of earning your gratitude."

"For what then?"

Brett hesitated a moment before he answered, and then turned from her towards the window as he spoke.

"It was not for the sake of anything."

"Mere caprice, then?" asked Marion, watching him closely.

"No, not that."

"I suppose your motives are a secret?" Marion laughed a little, perhaps at her own curiosity.

"Yes." Brett pronounced the single word with great earnestness.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Marion.

"Yes. And I shall be very sorry if you ever find out what that secret is."

"How mysterious!"

"Yes, is it not?"

Brett had suddenly assumed a tone of indifference. As he spoke Vanbrugh and Dolly rose and came forwards towards the table.

"If you have quite finished not looking at those photographs, give them to me, Brett," said Vanbrugh. "Miss Maylands wishes to see them."

"Oh, take them by all means," answered Brett, thrusting a dozen or more into his hands. "As I was saying, Mrs. Darche, I am the worst judge of architecture in the world — especially from photographs."

"Architecture, eh?" observed Vanbrugh, as he re-crossed the room with Dolly. "Rather hard on photographs of etchings from portraits."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Dolly, laughing softly and looking back at Brett and Mrs. Darche. "They talk of love's temple, you know, and building up one's happiness — and lots of things of that sort — the architecture of the affections."

"You seem to care," said Vanbrugh, sitting down and laying the photographs upon his knees.

"Do I? Do you not?"

"I — oh, well, in a sort of a fatherly way, I suppose." He held up one of the photographs upside down and looked at it.

"Yes. Now I care in a sort of a sisterly way, you know. It is very much the same thing, I fancy."

"Is that all?" asked Vanbrugh with a short laugh. "I thought you had made up your mind."

"About what?"

"About Harry Brett."

Dolly looked at him in surprise and drew herself up a little stiffly. "What about him?"

"I do not mean to be rude, nor inquisitive, nor anything of the sort — so I think I had better turn the conversation."

"But you do not. You are waiting for me to say something. Do you think I am afraid? Do you think I am like all the girls you meet and dance with, and repeat your pretty speeches to?"

"Repeat is graceful," said Vanbrugh, "considerate — so kind of you."

"I do not feel kind," answered Dolly emphatically, "and I am not at all afraid of telling the truth."

"Considering your interest in Sunday schools that is what I should expect."

"I am just as fond of dancing and enjoying myself as any one else," said Dolly, relenting, "though I do take an interest in Sunday schools."

"Fashionable charities and dissipations, as Brett calls them — I see."

"Do not see in that tone of voice, please — if what you see has anything to do with me."

"Which it has," said Vanbrugh. "Mrs. Darche is one of your charities, I suppose — and Harry Brett is one of your dissipations."

"You are too complicated," answered Dolly, really not understanding. "Say it in American, will you not?"

"You love Brett, and you are nice to Mrs. Darche, though you hate her," said Vanbrugh in a tone which left Dolly in doubt as to whether he was in earnest or only chaffing. She paused a moment and stared at him before she answered, and then to his great astonishment spoke with more coldness than he was accustomed to.

"Precisely," she said. "I love Mrs. Darche and I hate Brett because he does not ask her to marry him as he should, now that Darche has been dead so long. I am sorry, Marion," she said, turning to Mrs. Darche, and going up to her rather suddenly, "dear — I really must be going."

"Already?" exclaimed Marion in surprise, "it is not three o'clock?"

"Almost," said Dolly, "and I have lots to do — ever so many people waiting for me at a Com-

mittee, and then a visit I must make, and a frock to try on—and then if we are to dine at seven so as to be dressed in time for the tableaux there is no afternoon at all."

"How busy you are! Yet you always look so fresh! How in the world do you do it?"

"A large appetite and a clear conscience—" suggested Brett, who seemed to be more than usually absent-minded.

Dolly glanced at him rather angrily as she shook hands with her friend. "Good-bye, dear Marion. It has been ever so nice! Good-bye."

She left the room. Vanbrugh was annoyed and discomforted by her sudden departure, but he made the best of the situation, and after closing the door behind her, sat down beside Mrs. Willoughby, who was listening to one of Brown's stories.

"I suppose she is angry with me," said Brett to Marion. "What did I say? I was thinking of something else."

"Then why did you choose that moment for speaking of her?" asked Mrs. Darche reproachfully. "You really must take care, you will make enemies."

"Of course. What does it matter?"

"It matters to me, if you make enemies of my friends."

"That is different," said Brett. "But seriously — do not people forgive a lack of tact sometimes — being a little absent-minded? Look at Jim Brown."

"That is quite another thing," Marion answered. "Yes — I heard what he was telling as we came into the room after the luncheon. Of course it was tactless. Of course no man in his senses should talk in a loud tone, before me, of a man falling overboard at sea and being drowned, still less —"

"What?" asked Brett.

A short pause followed the question, and when Marion answered it, it was evident that she was making an effort.

"Still less of the possibility that such a man might be heard of again some day."

"That at least is improbable," said Brett, very gravely.

"I shivered when I heard what he said."

"I do not wonder."

In the meantime, at the other end of the room, Mr. Brown was enjoying at last the supreme satisfaction of talking without reserve about the story he had seen in the papers that morning.

"One never knows what to believe," said Mrs. Willoughby.

"Believe nothing," said Vanbrugh with much conviction. "In particular, my dear Mrs. Willoughby, do not believe in Brown's tales. He is a perfectly idle man, and he does nothing but sleep and talk, because he has a liver and cannot eat. A man who has nothing to do requires a great deal of sleep and a great deal of conversation."

"I say, Russell, old man," protested Mr. Brown with a good-humoured laugh, "this is rather unkind. Where would you get your conversation if I did not supply you with the items? That is what one's best friends come to, Mrs. Willoughby, in this bustling world. And why should not people eat, sleep, and talk, — and do nothing else if they have time? But as for this story, I never pretended that it was anything but newspaper gossip — not even that — a sensation item, manu-

factured down town, perhaps. 'Woman burned alive in Jersey City,' — five lines — 'Deny the report,' — five lines more — that is the sort of thing. But this is a strange coincidence, or a strange story. It might almost be poor Darche's case, with a sensational ending."

"Oh, well," answered Vanbrugh, who by this time quite understood the meaning of Brett's strange conduct before luncheon, "of course it is only a sensational paragraph, and belongs to your department, Brown. But as you say, the coincidences are extraordinary. A man says he fell overboard from a Channel boat, and was picked up by an Italian bark, which took him to Valparaiso after all sorts of adventures. The weak point in these stories generally is that the man never seems to take the trouble to communicate with his relations from the first port he reaches, and takes an awful lot of trouble to get shipwrecked somewhere on the way. But in this case that is the strong point. What did you say the fellow's name was?"

"Why, my dear man, that is three-quarters of the coincidence. He calls himself John Drake.

Transpose the 'r' and the 'a,' and that looks uncommonly like John Darche."

"No doubt," said Vanbrugh; "but then there is nothing peculiar about 'John.' If he had been christened 'Eliphalet Xenophon' it would have been considerably stranger. Besides if he really were Darche he would not call himself either Darche or John."

"How can you suggest anything so dreadful!" exclaimed Mrs. Willoughby.

"Why 'dreadful'?" asked Mr. Brown.

"Only think of it," said Mrs. Willoughby. "An escaped suicide — I mean, a convict who escaped and killed himself."

"And you think that the disgrace of having committed suicide will cling to him in after life, so to say — in Sing-Sing?" inquired Mr. Brown.

"Do not make me out more stupid than I really am." Cousin Annie assumed a deprecatory expression. "Do you not think that a man like Darche — convicted of a crime — escaped — if he suddenly re— re— What is the word?"

"Imperfectly resurrected," suggested Vanbrugh.

"Oh yes! Anything! If he came back to

life, and yet was supposed to be dead, and was trying to begin all over again and to make a fresh start, and that kind of thing — under another name — "

"In order to enjoy the satisfaction of seeing his widow marry some one else?" asked Vanbrugh, with less discretion than usual.

"I did not mean that," said Mrs. Willoughby quickly. "Poor Marion! Poor Marion! What time is it, Mr. Brown?"

"Three."

"Oh dear!" exclaimed cousin Annie.

"Dear me!" echoed Vanbrugh.

"Yes, it is later than I thought," said Mr. Brown.

By a common impulse, all three rose at once and crossed the room to take leave of their hostess.

"What, are you all going?" asked the latter.

"Do you know what time it is, Marion?" And not waiting for an answer, Mrs. Willoughby held out her hand.

"It is awfully late," observed Vanbrugh, by way of explanation.

"Thank you so much," said Mr. Brown, shaking hands warmly.

"Yes, it is later than I thought." Brett looked at his watch, though by this time he had made up his mind to outstay the others.

"Well — if you must go— "

Marion did not show any anxiety to detain her guests as they filed out of the room.

"You did not mean me to go away with the crowd, did you?" asked Brett, as the door closed behind Mr. Brown.

"Not if you wished to stay," answered Marion, taking her favourite chair near the fire. "Take another cigarette. Sit down."

"And make myself at home? Thanks."

"If you can," said Mrs. Darche with a pleasant laugh.

"Did you hear what they were saying to each other over there while we were talking?" inquired Brett, who by this time seemed to have recovered from the unnatural embarrassment he had shown at first. He had rather suddenly made up his mind that Marion ought to know something about the story in the papers.

"No. Did you?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I do not like that." Mrs. Darche did not seem pleased. "It was not nice of you — to be able to talk as you were talking, and to listen to the conversation of other people at the same time."

"Do you know what they were saying?" asked Brett.

"No, certainly not."

"It is not a pleasant subject. They were talking about that paragraph in the papers again. Of course there is nothing in the story, and yet it is very strange. May I speak of it?"

"Is it of any use?" asked Mrs. Darche, beginning to suspect what was coming.

"I hardly know," Brett answered, "and yet if it should turn out there is even the smallest grain of truth — "

"There cannot be. I know there cannot be," she repeated, after a moment's pause, as though she had gone over the whole question in the interval. "Oh, what is the use of suggesting such things?"

"Yes," answered Brett. "You know there can-

not be any truth in it — even if he were alive he would not come back. I know it, and yet if he should, it would be so horrible that I cannot help thinking of it. You know what it would mean if that man were to return."

"I know what it would mean to me. Do not speak of it, please."

"I must, I cannot help it. I feel as if something were driving me to speak. You did not hear the whole story. They said the man was picked up in mid-channel by an Italian ship more than *seven months* ago."

"Seven months ago!"

"Even the time would fit the truth. But then — stop. Was he a swimmer? Yes — of course — I remember him at Newport." Brett answered his own question. "The ship — a bark they called it — was outward bound, and could not put in again. She was on her way to Valparaiso. You know where that is, all the way round by the Straits of Magellan. Something happened to her, she got wrecked or something — they say that a lot of the crew were killed and eaten up by the cannibals in Terra del Fuego. John Drake —"

"John Drake!" Marion exclaimed.

"Yes, another coincidence. John Drake — horribly like is it not? — managed to escape with the second mate, the carpenter, and the cabin boy, got across to the Patagonian country — there are lots of details. They wandered about for ever so long, and at last turned up somewhere. They were all Italians, and Drake, who had no papers, was shipped off again by the Consul on board of another Italian ship. That accounts for six months, with the bad weather they had. Then there is a long blank. And now this John Drake turns up here —"

"Yes — but — after all, if he changed his name, he would change it altogether." She stopped and looked at him, for the argument seemed conclusive.

"That is not the only point that is not clear," Brett answered. "But the names are so dreadfully alike."

"But there is a very great difference!" Marion exclaimed. "There are a great many Drakes — but Darche is a very uncommon name."

"That is the reason why he changed it so little."

"Oh, why do you suggest such a possibility — of what use is it? Why?" She rose suddenly and began to move about the room.

"Because I am a fool, I suppose," Brett answered, not moving from his seat. "But I cannot help it. The idea has taken hold of me and I cannot get rid of it. I feel as though that man had risen from the dead to wreck your life."

"It would be a wreck indeed!" said Marion in a low voice that had a sort of horror in it. "You could not save me this time — not even you."

"And yet —"

"What?"

"No — I ought not to say it."

"Mysteries again?" Marion stopped beside him and looked down into his face.

"The same, if you choose to call it a mystery."

"I wish you would speak out, my dear friend," said Marion gravely. "I feel all the time that there is something in your mind which you wish to say to me, but which you will not, or cannot, or dare not say. Am I right?"

"To some extent."

"I do not think you understand what friendship really means."

"Friendship?" Brett exclaimed. "For you? No, perhaps I do not. I wish I did. I would give a great deal if I could."

"I do not in the least understand," said Marion, sitting down again. "You, my best friend, tell me in the most serious, not to say mysterious way, that you do not know what friendship means, when you are proving every day that you do. I hate secrets! Very few friendships will bear them. I wish there were none between us."

"Ah, so do I!"

"Then let there be none," said Marion in a tone that was almost authoritative. "Why should there be? In the dear old times when I was so unhappy and you were so good to me, we had no secrets, at least none that I knew of. Why should we have any now?"

"The very reason why there must be one at all is the secret itself. Will you not believe me if I tell you that it would hurt you very much to know it?"

"It is hard to believe, and I"—she laughed—

"I can confess to a reasonable amount of curiosity on the subject."

"Do not be curious," said Brett, very gravely, "please do not be curious. You might find it out and I should never forgive myself."

"But if I forgave you — "

"That would make no difference. That would not make the smallest difference."

"What! Not to you?" Mrs. Darche glanced at him in surprise.

"Not to me," answered Brett with decision. "The harm would be done."

"Utterly incomprehensible!" exclaimed Marion as though speaking to herself. "I cannot help asking you again," she said turning to Brett again. "Tell me, has it anything to do with my husband?"

"Yes it has."

"Then tell me! Tell me, for heaven's sake!" By this time she was growing anxious.

"Not for the world," said Brett firmly.

"You do not know how unkind you are. You do not know — you do not know how much your friendship is to me, and how you are letting this wretched mystery come between us."

"I know better, better than you can guess."

"And you are keeping it to yourself because you are afraid of hurting me — hurting me!" she repeated bitterly. "As though I were not past hurting, these many months, as though I had not been through most all that a woman can bear and live, and yet I have borne it and have lived. No, I am wrong. I can still be hurt. Two things could hurt me. If by some horrible miracle John came back to life, and if —" She paused and hesitated.

"What?" asked Brett, who hardly seemed to be listening to her.

"If you allowed anything to break up this friendship of ours. But the one is impossible. John is dead, and I have lived down the shame of his memory, and the other — no, it would be your fault."

"It would hurt you much more to know what I am keeping from you than to lose my friendship, or rather your friendship for me," said Brett, shaking his head. "Mine you cannot lose, whatever you do. I am giving you the best proof of it now."

"And do you mean to say that after all that came out in those dark days, that after the trial and conviction, and my husband's escape and his horrible end, that there is still worse behind? — that he left something which you know and I do not know, but which, if I knew it, could still have the power to wreck my life and break what is the best part of me — yes, I am not ashamed to say so — the best part of me — our friendship. I am not tired of the sound of that word yet, nor shall be. Do you mean that? Do you really mean what you say?"

"Yes," answered Brett, who had nodded at each of her questions. "I mean that there is something which I know, and of which the knowledge might ruin the happiness you have found since you have been alone. And yet you ask me to tell you what it is, when no possible good could come from your knowledge of it."

"Yes, I do," said Marion, emphatically. "And as for my happiness, you are killing it with every word you say. You have knocked from under my feet the security of my position and you have taken the good out of what was best

by saying that a word from you would spoil it. What is there left now but to tell me the truth?"

"Your belief in me, if you ever had any — and I know that you had, as I hope that you still have."

"My belief in you?" Marion paused, looked at him and then turned away. "Yes, but the more I believe in you, the more I must believe every word you say — "

While she was speaking, Stubbs opened the door, and entered the room, bringing a card.

"The person wishes to see you, madam," he said, holding out the silver salver.

Mrs. Darche's face betrayed some annoyance at the interruption as she took up the card and read the name. "W. H. Wood, Associated Press. What does this mean?" she asked turning to Brett. "Do you know the man?"

"Evidently a reporter," said Brett.

"Tiresome people," exclaimed Mrs. Darche. "I wonder what in the world he wants. Perhaps he has made a mistake. At all events there is no reason why I should see him. Say that I am engaged," she added, turning to Stubbs.

"Wait a minute, Stubbs," said Brett, calling after the man. "Do not send him away," he added, turning to Marion. "Let me see him."

"Why?" she asked.

"I have an idea that he has come about that story that has got into the papers," said Brett in a low voice.

"Impossible!" exclaimed Mrs. Darche with great emphasis.

"No," objected Brett, "there is just a possibility, and if it should be that, some one had better see him. Something very disagreeable might be written, and it is better to stop it at once."

"Very well," said Mrs. Darche, yielding. "If you really think it is better, see him here. Ask Mr. Wood to come in," she said to Stubbs, as she passed him and went out.

CHAPTER X.

BRETT stood before the fireplace as the reporter entered the room — a quiet, pale young man with a pinched face, smooth brown hair and thin hands which somehow conveyed the impression of sadness.

"I asked to see Mrs. Darche," he said apologetically.

"Mrs. Darche is engaged," answered Brett. "I am a friend of hers and will answer any questions so far as I can."

"Thank you. I have no doubt, sir, that you are often troubled by us. You know the reporter has to be everywhere. I will not take any more of your time than I can help. I understand that Mrs. Darche and her friends are to take part in some tableaux for a charitable purpose at the end of the week — "

"I fancy there is some mistake about that," said Brett. "Mrs. Darche is in mourning."

"Precisely," said Mr. Wood. "I daresay Mrs. Darche would be glad to have the report denied. I understand, then, that there are not to be any tableaux."

"I believe there is to be something of the kind, but Mrs. Darche has nothing to do with the affair — beyond giving her advice, I think. She would certainly not care very much to be talked of in the papers just now."

"Just so," replied Mr. Wood readily. "I quite understand that there is a prejudice against it, and of course Mrs. Darche's name shall not appear. But you do not know what a great interest our readers take in social doings. Our paper has a very large circulation in the West."

"I am very glad to know it. Would it not be enough just to mention the fact that there are to be some tableaux for a charity?"

"If you would give me a hint about the subjects. Historical? One or two names would be very useful."

"Really I do not think that any of us care to see our names in the paper," said Brett.

"I will be as discreet as you wish — Mr. —"

"My name is Brett."

"Mr. Brett," repeated the reporter, making a note. "May I inquire, Mr. Brett, if you yourself take a part in the entertainment?"

"Well — yes — I do."

"Any particular costume?"

"Yes —" Brett hesitated slightly and smiled. "Yes. Particular costumes are rather the rule in tableaux."

"I do not wish to be indiscreet, of course."

"No, I daresay not. I believe I am to be Darnley."

"Thank you." Here Mr. Wood made another note. "Miss Maylands as Queen Mary Stuart? Is the report correct?"

"I believe so," answered Brett, coldly.

"Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Brett. If you could oblige me with one or two more names I could fix it nicely."

"I suppose, Mr. Wood, that you mean to say something about it whether I tell you or not?"

"Well, now, Mr. Brett," replied the reporter, assuming a more confidential manner, "to be quite frank, that is just what happens. We do not

like to tire people out with questions they do not care to answer, but the social column has to be filled somehow, and if we do not get the news for it, it is sometimes made up in the office."

"So I have often been led to believe from reading it," said Brett. "There are to be three tableaux, from well-known pictures, in which Miss Maylands, Mr. Russell Vanbrugh, myself, and a few others are to take part. The affair is to take place, I think, at Mrs. Trehearne's house."

"Thank you, Mr. Brett. Dancing afterwards?"

"I do not know."

"Pardon me. Supper furnished by Delmonico, I suppose?"

"Well I really have not asked. I daresay."

"Thank you, Mr. Brett. Delmonico." Mr. Wood's pencil noted the fact. Brett began to think that he had had enough of the interview, and deliberately lighting a cigarette looked at the reporter. "Anything else you would like to know, Mr. Wood?"

"Well, since you have been so very obliging, Mr. Brett, I would like to ask you a question."

"All right," said Brett, resignedly. "Go ahead."

"Mrs. Darche is a widow, I understand."

"Yes."

"Mr. Darche was the unfortunate victim of an accident several months ago, I believe?"

"Yes."

"Then of course there can be no truth in the story that he arrived in New York yesterday?"

"What story?" Brett asked, turning sharply upon the young man.

"I thought perhaps you might have seen it in this morning's paper," answered Wood quietly. "But perhaps you would not have noticed it, as there was a misprint in the name. A man came to the office yesterday and told the editor in charge that Mr. John Darche, who fell overboard last spring from a steamer, and was supposed to have been drowned, had turned up, and that he had seen him. I guess he was a crank. There are lots of them hanging around the office, and sometimes they get a drink for a bit of sensation."

"Oh! is that the way news is manufactured?" inquired Brett, with some contempt.

"Not in our office, Mr. Brett," replied the reporter, drawing himself up. "You can see for

yourself that we only get our information from the most reliable sources. If that were not so, I should not have disturbed you to-day. But as there is no doubt in your mind that Mr. Darche is positively dead, I daresay that Mrs. Darche would be glad to have the report of her husband's return contradicted?"

"I do not think it matters much, since the name was printed Drake."

"Pardon me," said Wood. "Some of the papers printed it correctly, and others are going to do so. I just saw two gentlemen from an evening paper, and they have got it straight for this afternoon."

"You do not mean to say that the papers believe the story?" asked Brett in real or affected surprise.

"Oh no, Mr. Brett, they give it for what it is worth."

"With headlines a foot high, I suppose?"

"Well, perhaps some of the papers will do so," answered the young man with a smile.

Brett's manner changed as he realised that he could not afford to let the reporter take away a

wrong impression. He sat down and pointed to a chair. "Take a cigarette, Mr. Wood."

"No, I thank you, I do not smoke. Thank you."

Mr. Wood sat down upon the edge of the chair beside Brett, who looked at him fixedly for a moment before speaking. "I do not suppose that it is necessary for me to repeat that this story is an absurd fabrication, and that if there is a man who is going about and calling himself John Darche, he ought to be in jail."

"Certainly, Mr. Brett, I am quite of that opinion."

"Then would you mind helping me to get hold of him? Where is the man to be heard of?"

"That is another matter, Mr. Brett. I shall be happy to see that the report is denied. But whether the man is an impostor or not, it will be hard to find him. That will not matter. We will explain everything to-morrow morning, and it will all be forgotten by the next day. You say you are quite sure, Mr. Brett, that Mr. Darche was not picked up when he fell overboard?"

"Sure!" answered Brett, authoritatively.

"I see," said Wood. "Thank you. I understand that it was in winter, in rough weather, and that the efforts made to save him were in vain."

"On the contrary, it was a calm, warm night in May. It is certainly strange that they should not have been able to save him. That ought to prove beyond question that he sank at once."

"There is no doubt about that, I should think," replied the reporter without much conviction. "I won't detain you any longer, Mr. Brett. The report shall be denied at once. Will you allow me to use your name as authority for these details?"

"Everybody knows the story."

"Pardon me. Our paper has a very large circulation in the West, and a well-known name like yours lends great weight to any statement."

"I did not know that my name was so particularly well known," observed Brett.

"Why, certainly, Mr. Brett. Your yacht won a race last year. I remember it very well."

"That might be a claim to distinction, but I never had a yacht."

"Not fond of the sea, Mr. Brett?"

"Oh, yes, I like it well enough," said Brett, rising, as though he wished it understood that the interview was at an end. "You will distinctly deny this report, will you not?"

"You can rely upon me to say just what you have said to me, Mr. Brett."

"Very well. Thank you. Then you will be good enough to say that there is not a word of truth in it, and warn people against the man who calls himself Darche?"

"Certainly, certainly. Thank you, Mr. Brett. Good morning, Mr. Brett."

"Good morning."

Brett followed the reporter with his eyes till the door closed behind him. He felt as though he had distinctly got the worst of it in the encounter, and yet he could not see how he could have said less. And that was how stories got about, he thought. If he had not seen the reporter, — if the latter had been turned away as Mrs. Darche had intended, the story of Darche's return would have been reported again and again. That, at least, thought Brett, was prevented for the present.

Nevertheless, as he stood alone during those few moments before sending word to Marion that the reporter was gone, Brett's face betrayed his terrible anxiety. He hesitated. More than once his hand went out towards the bell and dropped again by his side. At last he made up his mind, touched the button, and sent Stubbs with his message to Mrs. Darche.

"Well?" she asked as she entered the room.

"It is all right," he answered. "It was about the charity tableaux. I did not want to go away without seeing you, so I sent Stubbs —"

"You are not going this moment?" Marion looked at him in surprise.

She was further than ever from understanding him. He seemed to act suddenly and irrationally. A quarter of an hour earlier he had been almost his old self, in spite of his strange references to a mystery which he could not communicate to her, and now he had changed again and resumed the incomprehensible manner he had affected of late. He seemed anxious to get away from her, even at the cost of seeming rude. Then, as he held out his hand to say good-bye, he surprised her more than ever.

"If you will allow me," he said, "I will come back in the course of the afternoon."

"Certainly," she answered, staring at him as she shook hands.

A moment later he was gone, leaving Marion in considerable perplexity and some anxiety of mind.

When Brett left the house he went in search of Vanbrugh, whom he ultimately found at a club. The conversation which had taken place between three men who were spending the long afternoon between letter-writing, the papers, and gossip, is worth recording.

It was about five o'clock. The names of the men were Goss, Greene, and Bewlay, and they were rather insignificant persons, but gentlemen, and all acquainted with the actors of this story. Goss was seated in a deep leathern easy-chair with a paper. Greene was writing a letter, and Bewlay was exceedingly busy with a cigar while waiting for some one to say something.

"Well!" exclaimed Goss. "That beats the record!"

"I say," said Greene, looking up and speaking

sharply, "I wish you would not startle a fellow in that way. My nerves are not of the best any way. What is the matter?"

"Oh, nothing in particular," said the first speaker. "John Darche has come back to life again. I thought he was drowned last May."

"Stuff!" ejaculated Greene, testily.

"All right. I do not want to disturb your correspondence."

"What is that about John Darche?" inquired Bewlay, delighted at hearing a voice.

"Some rubbish or other," answered Goss. "It is the fashion to resurrect people nowadays — sort of way the newspapers have of getting ahead of the day of judgment. If this goes on, that entertainment will not draw."

"What is it, any way?"

"Headlines to begin with. 'The return of the prodigal — John W. Darche, alive and asking questions. Accident — not suicide — interview with Mr. Henry C. Brett.'"

"What the dickens has Brett got to do with it?" asked Greene, looking up from his letter again.

"They say he is engaged to marry Mrs. Darche," said Bewlay, in explanation.

"That is another ridiculous story," answered Greene. "I happen to know he is as good as engaged to Miss Maylands."

"Let me see the paper, please," said Bewlay.

"No, I will read it," said Goss, shifting his position so as to get a better light. "Then you can all hear. 'Our reporter called this afternoon at the house of Mrs. John W. Darche, the beautiful and accomplished widow who so long dispensed her hospitality in Lexington Avenue. The beauteous lady was doubtless engaged in the consideration of the costumes for certain charity tableaux in which her mourning prevents her from taking a part, but in which her artistic taste and advice are invaluable to the performers, and our reporter was received by Mr. Henry C. Brett, the well-known lawyer, yachtsman, and patron of the turf, who is to play the part of Darnley to Miss Maylands' Queen Mary of Scotland in the artistic treat which awaits the favoured and charitable to whom invitations have been tendered. Mr. Brett was kind enough to

answer a few questions regarding the report of Mr. John Darche's return to New York which appeared in the morning papers. Mr. Brett affected to treat the story with unconcern, but it was evident from his anxious manner and from his somewhat nervous bearing that he was deeply moved, though he bravely "took arms against the sea of troubles." Mr. Brett said repeatedly in the course of the conversation that the story was an absurd fabrication, and if there was a man going around calling himself John Darche he ought to be in jail. He professed to be quite sure that Mr. Darche was dead, but was obliged to admit that there was no evidence forthcoming to certify to the tragedy. "The accident," said Mr. Brett, "happened on board of a channel steamer more than seven months ago. It was a calm, warm night in May. Two ladies were lying in their chairs on the quarter-deck engaged in conversation. Suddenly in the mysterious gloom they noticed the muffled figure of a gentleman passenger leaning over the rail hard by them. A moment later the figure was gone. There was a dull splash and all was over. They at once realised the

horrid situation and cried aloud for help, but there seems to have been no one else on deck in that part of the boat. Many minutes elapsed before they could explain what they had seen, and the necessary orders were given for stopping the steamer. The Captain then retraced his course, lowered a number of boats, and every effort was made to prosecute the search until far into the night when the steamer, which carried mails, was reluctantly obliged to resume her way. His body," said Mr. Brett in conclusion, "was never found." Mr. Brett, as was very natural, was more than anxious that the report should be denied, but in the face of the facts he himself stated with such pellucid clearness, it is impossible to say conscientiously that the story of Mr. Darche's return may not be true. The fact remains that a gentleman whose name is undoubtedly Darche is now in New York, and if he is really Mr. John Darche of Lexington Avenue, steps will be taken to set all doubts at rest before twenty-four hours have expired.' I daresay you are not surprised at my exclamation now, after reading that," said Goss, looking round at his hearers. "Pretty serious for Brett."

"Pretty serious for Mrs. Darche," observed Greene.

"Pretty serious for everybody," said Bewlay, smoking thoughtfully.

"That is," suggested Greene, "if it is not all a fake, which is probably the truth about it."

"Has anybody seen Brett here?" inquired Goss.

At this point the conversation was interrupted by the entry of Mr. Brown, who was also a member of the club.

"Is Brett here?" he asked, looking about.

"Just what I was asking," answered Goss. "I suppose you have seen this?"

"About Darche? Yes. I am afraid it is true."

"What! You do not believe it?" Greene was the most sceptical of the party.

"Have you seen him?" asked Bewlay.

"No," answered Mr. Brown. "I have not seen him, but I mean to before long. This is much too serious to be flying about in the papers like this. Imagine what would happen if it fell into Mrs. Darche's hands. Why it is enough to kill any ordinary woman on the spot! To think that that infernal blackguard may not be dead after all."

"You seem to feel rather strongly on the subject," observed Greene. "Are you engaged to marry Mrs. Darche too?"

"Nonsense!" ejaculated Brown. "I am in earnest. Just put yourself in her position."

"For my part I had rather not," replied Goss with a smile. "But I agree with Brown. A more unmitigated blackguard than John Darche never breathed the unholy air of Wall Street. The only decent thing about him was his suicide, and now virtue is to be cheated of that."

"Mrs. Darche never speaks of him, I believe?" The question came from Bewlay.

"He did not return the civility," said Goss. "I have heard him talk about his wife in this very room — well — I won't say how, but he was a brute."

"Judging from your language you must be talking about Darche," said a fifth speaker. Vanbrugh had entered the room.

"Yes," answered Brown, "we were. The damning was going on, but we had not got to the faint praise. What do you think about all this, Vanbrugh?"

"The question must be settled one way or the other before to-night," answered the last comer. "If Darche is really alive the fact must be kept quiet until to-morrow and then some one must tell his wife. I propose that we elect a committee of action, give up our dinner parties if we have any, and go and find the fellow."

"That sounds like good advice," said Brown.

"We might as well look for a Chinaman in Pekin," put in Greene, "as to try to hunt out any particular tough in the Bowery at this time of day."

"We can try any way," said Mr. Brown, who was of a hopeful temperament. "I am not engaged to dine anywhere, are you, Vanbrugh?"

"No."

"Then come along." They turned towards the door and were just going out when Brett met them, looking very white.

"Hello, Brett!" exclaimed Brown. "You are the very man we have been looking for. Come along with us and find John Darche."

"Wait a minute," said Vanbrugh, interposing. "Have you seen this interview?" He took the

paper from Greene and gave it to Brett, who read rapidly while the others looked on, talking in undertones.

"Damn!" he exclaimed, turning to the others. "Have you all been reading this stuff? I hope you do not believe that is what I said? A man came to the house after luncheon. You fellows had just gone and I was going. Mrs. Darche did not want to see him, but I advised her to let me tell him what ought to be said about this affair. He tried to pump me about the charity tableaux and then asked me about Darche. I told him that it was all an absurd fabrication, and he promised to say so and to deny all reports. And this is the result."

"Of course it is," said Greene. "The natural result of putting yourself into any reporter's hands."

"I would like to say a word for the reporter," said Mr. Brown mildly. "The paper is not his. He does not edit it. He does not get a share of the profits, and when he interviews people he merely is doing what he has undertaken to do. He is earning his living."

"Marriage and death and reporters make barren our lives," observed Greene sourly, and some of the men laughed.

"I say, Brett, how much of this did you actually say?" asked Vanbrugh.

"Not a word, it seems to me. And yet I see some of my own phrases worked in." He picked up the paper and looked at it again. "Yes, I did say that it was a warm May night. I did say that his body was never found. Yes, that is true enough. How the deuce does the fellow manage to twist it so?"

"Does it not strike you that the reporter has only shown you your own account in the light in which other people will look at it?" inquired Mr. Brown, sententiously.

"Oh, confound it all, Brown, how can you say such a thing?" exclaimed Brett.

"Well, I will explain," replied Mr. Brown. "Here are the facts, by your own showing. On a warm evening in spring, and in calm weather, John Darche fell overboard. I do not say he threw himself overboard, though it was said that he did, to get away from the detective, possibly it

may have been an accident after all. We do not know. He was seen to go over by some one, possibly by two ladies. It was very likely at supper-time. We do not know that either. But it is quite sure that there were not many people about. The ladies screamed, as was natural, called for help and all that sort of thing. But on a calm May night those channel boats run very fast. They did not cry out 'man overboard!' as a sailor would have done, and very probably five minutes elapsed before the Captain gave the order to stop. In that time the boat would have run a mile and a half. It could not stop inside of half a mile. Well, do you know anything about the tides and currents in the Channel? The steamer could not have gone back to the point at which Darche was lost much inside of twenty minutes. In that time the current may have carried him a mile or more in one direction or the other. Every one remembers that Darche was a good swimmer. As it happened in May, he was not burdened with an overcoat, or thick boots, and there are always vessels about in the Channel. Why is it so very

improbable that he should have been picked up by one, outward bound — "

While he was speaking, Brett played nervously with an unlighted cigar, which he held in his hand.

"A sailing-vessel outward bound from England to South America would not be in the Channel," observed Vanbrugh.

"Nobody said she was from England," retorted Brown. "She may have been from Amsterdam. A great many Italian vessels take in cargo there."

"Surely she would have stopped and put Darche ashore," said Greene with conviction. But the others laughed.

"You are not much of a sailor," said Brown. "You cannot stop a sailing-vessel, as you express it, and run into any harbour you like as though she were a steam-tug. To put back might mean a loss of two or three weeks to the captain. Upon my soul, Vanbrugh, I cannot see why it is so improbable."

"You are not in earnest, Brown?" asked Brett anxiously.

"I am, though. A case like that happened not very long ago. Everybody knows about it. It is a fact. A man came back and found his wife married to somebody else."

"Enoch Arden!" suggested Greene contemptuously.

"Precisely the same thing. The man had been living somewhere near San Francisco. After he came back he found his wife had married an old friend of his — a very good fellow. He would not break her heart, so he went off to live by himself in the Rockies."

"I wish you would stop!" exclaimed Brett, almost livid.

"I wonder it does not strike you in the same way," continued Mr. Brown, unmoved. "You are a lawyer, Vanbrugh. Now just argue the case, and meet my points."

"Well really, you do put the case pretty strongly," answered Vanbrugh thoughtfully. "If you look at it in that way, there certainly is a bare shadow of a possibility that Darche may have come back."

"Good God, Vanbrugh, don't!" cried Brett.

"I cannot quite help it." Vanbrugh drew Brown a little aside and spoke in a lower tone, but Brett, who could scarcely control himself, moved up behind them. "Look here, Brown," said Vanbrugh, "we ought not to talk like this before Brett. After all, it is a mere possibility, one chance in a thousand."

"Considering the peculiarities of the name," argued Mr. Brown, "there are more chances than that."

"Possibly. But why should he go to the newspaper office instead of hiding altogether, or getting away from New York by the next steamer?"

"That is true," assented Mr. Brown.

"I say, you fellows," cried Brett, coming between them. "Stop that, won't you? You are both infatuated. Why, you must be mad! Everybody knows he is dead."

"It is certainly probable," said Mr. Brown doubtfully, "but it is not sure."

"Do not get excited, Brett," said Vanbrugh. "There are a lot of men looking on. Go home and leave it to us. We will find the man and see him before to-night."

"I am going with you," said Brett resolutely.

"No, you are not," said Vanbrugh, looking at him curiously. "You are no good. You are losing your head already. Go home and keep quiet."

"Yes, it would be much better," urged Mr. Brown. "Besides, two of us are quite enough."

"You do not really believe it," Brett said suddenly, after a moment's hesitation.

"Oh no, I suppose not," answered Vanbrugh with affected indifference.

"Cheer up, old man!" said Mr. Brown. "There may not be anything in it after all."

"May not!" exclaimed Brett. "I ought not to be here, anyhow," he added, speaking to Vanbrugh. "He may ring at her door at any moment." And without further words he disappeared into the hall.

"Brett seems to be pretty badly rattled," remarked Greene.

"Yes," answered Goss. "Strange, is it not? Yet you are quite sure that he is to marry Miss Maylands?"

"It is not safe to be sure of anything," said

Greene, going back to the writing-table and folding his letter.

"I believe it is true that he has come back," mused Bewlay, relighting his cigar.

"There certainly is a possibility," said Vanbrugh.

"Of course there is," assented Mr. Brown.

"I almost believe it myself," said Greene, rising and going out with his letter.

"It is a queer story, is it not?" observed Goss.

"Yes," answered Bewlay. "It has made me quite thirsty."

"Well, this is a good stopping-place," replied the other. "Ten minutes for refreshments."

CHAPTER XI.

VANBRUGH and Mr. Brown lost no time, for the former knew exactly what to do. Within three-quarters of an hour they had been to headquarters in Mulberry Street, had ascertained that there was ground for the report that John Darche had returned, that the police were making haste to secure him and that he had passed the night without much attempt at concealment, in a sailors' lodging-house on the east side. They found the place without difficulty, and were informed that the man Darche had gone out in the morning, leaving his few effects in charge of the lodging-house keeper. The house was watched by detectives. Vanbrugh asked Brown to stay at the Mulberry Street Station until dinner-time and then to bring him news at Mrs. Darche's in Lexington Avenue, whither he at once returned, fearing some trouble and anxious to give timely warning.

He knew enough of criminals to suspect that Darche, finding himself in New York very much against his will and doubtless without money, would in all likelihood attempt to obtain money from his wife to aid him in making his escape. He would probably not waste time in writing, but would appear in person at the house, just before dinner when he would know that Marion must be at home, and he would have little or no difficulty in forcing his way into her presence.

This was what he foresaw in case the man proved to be really John Darche. The police were satisfied that there was no mistake, and that a fortunate accident had thrown the escaped criminal into their hands. Nevertheless, Vanbrugh had doubts on the subject. The coincidence of name was possible, if not probable, and no one had given him any description which would have applied any more to John Darche than to any other man of his age and approximately of his complexion. The lodging-house keeper was evidently under the impression that the man, whoever he was, must be a sailor; but any one familiar with sea-faring men knows that, apart

from some peculiarity of dress there is often very little to distinguish them from landsmen, beyond the fact that no seaman ever wears spectacles, and that most sailors have bronzed faces. But a landsman is easily imposed upon by a "guernsey," a jack-knife, a plug of tobacco, and a peculiar taste in swearing.

When Brett had left Marion Darche so abruptly, she had gone to her morning-room and shut herself up to think, with no especial result, except that she was very unhappy in the process. She would not even see Dolly Maylands, who came in soon afterwards, but sent her word to have tea in the library with Cousin Annie. She herself, she said, would come down later. She begged Dolly to stay to dinner, just as she was.

Dolly was busy as usual, but she was anxious about her friend and about Brett, and her own life seemed very perplexing. Men were very odd creatures, she thought. Why did Brett hesitate to ask Marion to marry him, since he was in love with her, unless he were sure that Marion loved Vanbrugh, or at least liked him better? And if Vanbrugh were not himself in love with Marion,

an idea which Dolly scouted with wrath, why did he not offer himself to her, Dolly Maylands? Considering that the world was a spheroid, thought Dolly, it was a very crooked stick of a world, after all.

"All alone, Dolly?" asked Mrs. Willoughby, entering the library.

"Yes," answered Dolly. "I am all alone, and I am tired, and I want some tea, and Marion is lying down, and everything is perfectly horrid. Do sit down and let us have a cosy talk, all by ourselves."

"Why will people scramble through life at such a rate?" And Mrs. Willoughby installed her gray self in an easy-chair. "I have told Marion fifty times since last summer that she will break down unless she gives herself a rest."

"My dear Mrs. Willoughby," said Dolly. "Marion is a very sensible woman and manages her existence on scientific principles. She really gets much more rest than you or I, not to mention the fact — well, I suppose I ought not to say it."

"What? Why not?"

"Well, I was thinking that since poor Mr.

Darche was drowned, life must have seemed like one long rest to Marion."

"Oh Dolly, how unkind!" exclaimed Mrs. Willoughby, and then paused a moment before she continued. "But I suppose there is some truth in it. What is that proverb? 'De — de — mort — '"

"'De mortuis nil nisi — something like bones,'" answered Dolly with a laugh.

"What? What is that?"

"Oh nothing. It only means that everybody should say the nicest possible things when people are dead. That was what you meant. But I should think the living would appreciate them more."

"Yes, yes," assented Mrs. Willoughby vaguely. "I daresay he would."

"He? Who is he?" asked Dolly with affected surprise.

"Oh I do not mean anything, my dear. I hardly think that Marion will marry again."

"I suppose they are admirably suited to each other?"

"Who?"

"Who? Why Marion and Mr. Vanbrugh. Who else?" Dolly watched Mrs. Willoughby's face.

"Oh, I was not thinking of that. I meant Mr. — hm —" She interrupted herself in fear of indiscretion. "Your dress will be complete now with the lace, will it not, Dolly?"

"Oh yes," answered Dolly in a careless tone. "It was just like Mr. Vanbrugh, was it not, to take all that trouble to find the very thing I wanted?"

"A man will take a great deal of trouble, my dear, when he wants to please somebody he is fond of."

"Yes — but me," suggested Dolly, just to see what Cousin Annie thought.

"Why not you? Should you like some tea, Dolly?"

"Why not me? I suppose because I am Marion's friend," Dolly answered.

"Oh yes, if you like to put it in that way —"

Mrs. Willoughby was interrupted by the appearance of Stubbs bringing in the tea.

"Is Mrs. Darche at home if any one calls, Stubbs?" she inquired.

"No, madam. Mrs. Darche is upstairs and not

at home." He paused a moment to see whether Mrs. Willoughby meant to say anything more, and then left the room.

"Dear Mrs. Willoughby, I do so want to ask you a question," said Dolly, beginning to pour the tea.

"What is it, my dear?"

"One lump or two?" inquired Dolly with hesitation.

"Is that all?" asked Mrs. Willoughby with a slight laugh.

"Not quite," answered Dolly. "Do you take milk?"

"Please, and one lump. What is the question, child?"

"No," said Dolly, laughing herself. "It was foolish and inquisitive, and all sorts of horrid things. I think I had better not ask it."

"About Marion and Mr. Brett?"

"Why?" Dolly asked, looking up quickly, and then hesitating. "Is there anything? I mean — yes, that is what I meant to ask."

"Well, my dear," answered Mrs. Willoughby in a confidential tone, "to tell the truth I am glad

to talk to somebody about it, for it is on my mind, and you know that Marion does not like to answer questions."

"Yes, I know. Well, so you think there is something between them?"

"My dear, of course there is," said Mrs. Willoughby without hesitation. "And I am quite sure that something has happened lately. In fact, I believe they are engaged to be married."

"Do you really? And — and — where does Mr. Vanbrugh come in?"

"Mr. Vanbrugh? I am sure I do not know. Perhaps he will be Harry Brett's best man."

"If they could see themselves as others see them," reflected Dolly under her breath, before she answered the remark. "They would make a handsome couple, would they not? But you are quite mistaken, dear Mrs. Willoughby — oh, you are quite — quite mistaken." She looked down and sipped her tea.

"How do you know that?" asked Mrs. Willoughby. "How can you be so sure? Do you not see how they go on together, always sitting in corners and talking in undertones?"

"Do you not see how Marion spoils Mr. Vanbrugh, and gets his special brand of cigarettes for him, and always asks him to dinner to fill up a place, and altogether behaves like an idiot about him? You must be blind if you do not see that. Let me give you another cup of tea?"

"Thanks, I have not finished," said Cousin Annie. "Of course, my dear child, no two people ever look at things from the same point of view, but I was thinking—"

Stubbs opened the door again.

"Mr. Vanbrugh," he announced.

"He knew you were here, my dear," said Mrs. Willoughby in a whisper. "He has come to see you."

"Will you be good-natured and forgive my spoiling your tea?" asked Vanbrugh, as he entered the room.

"We will try," said Dolly.

"Sit down," said Mrs. Willoughby, "and have some with us."

"Thanks," answered Vanbrugh. "I am even ruder than I seem, for I am in a hurry. Do you think I could see Mrs. Darche? For a minute?"

"I daresay," replied Cousin Annie, doubtfully.

"Of course you can. She is upstairs and not at home." Dolly laughed.

"So Stubbs told me," said Vanbrugh, "and I came in to ask you to help me. I am very glad I have seen you first. I know it is late and I will not keep you a moment. There is something that I must say. I have just been at the club for a moment and Brown came in and four or five others. There is certainly an impression that John Darche has really come back again."

"Good heavens!" cried Mrs. Willoughby, thoroughly startled.

"Oh, how awful!" exclaimed Dolly in real distress. "But you were all saying after luncheon that it was impossible."

"I know," said Vanbrugh. "I know we were. But it looks otherwise now. There was so much talk about it that I proposed to Brown to try and find the man. We have been down town since then, to Mulberry Street. There certainly is a man knocking about under the name of John Darche, who landed from an Italian vessel last night."

"Have you seen him?" asked Dolly. "Oh, poor Marion!"

"Dreadful, dreadful!" repeated Mrs. Willoughby, staring at Vanbrugh.

"No," answered the latter in reply to Dolly's question, "we have not seen him, but we shall have him this evening."

"Here?" exclaimed Mrs. Willoughby, looking round nervously.

"Here in this house?"

"Yes — or at least, under our hand," said Vanbrugh. "Brown is waiting for information at the Mulberry Street Station."

"To bring him here to-night?" asked Cousin Annie, with increasing anxiety.

"No, to keep him from coming."

"And you have come to warn Marion?" inquired Dolly.

"Yes, in a way," answered Vanbrugh. "But not to tell her, of course. I want her to give strict orders about any odd-looking persons who may present themselves. I mean to tell her that I am afraid some reporter may try to get in, and that the man at the door must be very careful."

"I will go to her," said Mrs. Willoughby, rising. "Mr. Vanbrugh — if he comes, if it is really he, he cannot be turned away from what was his own house."

"No, but he shall be stopped at the door, and I will go out and talk to him and persuade him to escape, or to come and see me in the morning, if he is mad enough to stay."

"Yes, that is sensible," answered Cousin Annie. "Shall I speak to my niece myself, or shall I make her come down?"

Vanbrugh hesitated a moment and looked at Dolly, who answered by an almost imperceptible nod.

"I think," said Vanbrugh, "that to put her to any inconvenience would make the matter look more serious than we wish her to think it is. Do you think you could explain, Mrs. Willoughby? Give her the idea that the newspaper man who was here to-day may come back — or some other person, or two or three. Anything of that sort."

"I will do my best," answered Mrs. Willoug

"You will wait until I come back, will yo

"Of course," replied Vanbrugh, as

room.

"Do you think it is really true?" asked Dolly.

"I do not know what to think. Putting all the facts we have together, there is certainly a possibility."

"I am very, very sorry," said Dolly, after a short pause.

"Poor Mrs. Darche!" exclaimed Vanbrugh. "After all these months of freedom she has had, it will break her heart."

"I was not thinking of Marion," answered Dolly.

"Of whom, then?" asked Vanbrugh.

"Of — of — some one else."

"Yes, I know."

"Yes," repeated Dolly with marked sympathy. "Will you not let me make you a nice cup of tea, Mr. Vanbrugh?"

"No, thanks."

"Will you not light a cigarette?" asked Dolly. "Here are some of your own."

"No, thanks," answered Vanbrugh absently. "I have just smoked."

"Do sit down and warm yourself," said Dolly, pushing a chair towards the fire.

"Well — thanks — I suppose Mrs. Willoughby will be gone some minutes. Have you thought of what might happen if Darche were alive?" he asked, reverting to the subject uppermost in his mind.

"I do not like to think of it. But I cannot help thinking of it," she answered almost inaudibly. "I know that I cannot, and I hate myself and everybody."

"We may have to think of it seriously in three or four hours," said Vanbrugh. "Brown will bring me word. He will dine with me, and I will be within reach in case anything happens."

"What a head you have!" exclaimed Dolly. "You ought to be a general."

"It is simple enough, it seems to me, as simple as going back to stop an express train when there has been an accident on the line."

"Yes, but it is always the one particular man who has more sense than the rest who thinks of stopping the express train."

"I suppose so," answered Vanbrugh indifferently. "The man who has his eyes open. It is odd, is it not, that the happiness of so many people should be at stake on one day?"

"So many?"

"Well, three at least."

"Three? Are there not four?" asked Dolly, with a smile.

"There is Stubbs, of course," said Vanbrugh thoughtfully; "not to mention a lot of people who would not be particularly glad to see Darche back, on general principles. Well, I am sorry for them all, but I was not thinking of them especially."

"Whom were you thinking of?"

"Some one not concerned in the matter—some one, I cannot say nearest; think of something that rhymes with it. You are fond of hymns and that sort of thing."

"Dearest?" suggested Dolly.

"Yes, 'dearest'; that rhymes, does it not?"

"Yes, that rhymes," assented Dolly, with a little sigh. "Whom were you thinking of?" she asked.

"A person."

"What an answer! And what an expression! I suppose the name of the person is a profound secret?"

"It has been a secret for some time," said Vanbrugh.

"Oh!— then you have a faithful disposition?" asked Dolly with a laugh.

"I hope so," answered Vanbrugh, smiling.

"Any other virtues?"

"Lots," he laughed in his turn.

"I am so glad."

"Why?"

"Virtue makes people so nice and safe," said Dolly, "and helps them to bear misfortune, and to do almost everything except enjoy themselves."

"What an appalling code for a Sunday school teacher!"

"Do not laugh. I have had an offer."

"Of marriage?" asked Vanbrugh, looking at her.

"No. If I had, I would not tell you. I have been offered twenty-five dollars a month to teach at a Sunday school—a visitor, who did not know me, you see, and wished to engage me."

"And you refused?"

"Yes. Foolish of me, was it not? Twenty-five dollars—just think!"

"It is a lot of money," laughed Vanbrugh.

"Several pairs of gloves," said Dolly gravely. "But I refused. You know the proverb—'be virtuous and you will be happy, but you will not have a good time.'"

"And you mean to have a good time. I have always been meaning to—but it is rather dull, all by myself. I am not young enough to be gay alone—nor old enough to enjoy being sour."

"There is a remedy—get married!" Dolly smiled, looked grave, and then smiled again.

"That is almost easier done than said, if one does not mind whom one marries."

"And you do mind, I suppose?"

"Yes—I am foolish enough to care," answered Vanbrugh, glancing at her.

"To care for some particular person—is that rude, or indiscreet, or horrid of me?"

"Very! But I will forgive you on one condition."

"I never accept conditions."

"Unconditional surrender? Is that it?"

"Of course," Dolly answered without hesitation.

"I surrender unconditionally—at discretion."

"Oh—very well. Then I will be nice and ask

what the condition was for the sake of which you kindly proposed to forgive me for what I did not do. Come — what is it?"

"You asked if I cared for one particular person," said Vanbrugh, gently.

"Yes. Do you?" He could hardly distinguish the words.

"I will tell you, if you will answer the same question."

"You answer first."

"Yes. That is the answer." His hand stole out towards hers.

"Yes — that is the other answer."

"Do two positives make a negative?" asked Vanbrugh, as their hands met.

"No — not in mathematics," laughed Dolly, a little awkwardly, and withdrawing her fingers from his. "Two negatives make a positive, sometimes."

"A positive 'no'?" asked Vanbrugh, incredulously.

"Sometimes."

"But we were both saying 'yes.'"

"We are both saying 'yes,'" repeated Dolly slowly.

"Could we not go a step farther?"

"How?" Dolly started a little and looked at him. "I do not understand — I thought — "

"What did you think?"

"I do not know what to think." She hesitated.

"Will you not let me help you to decide?" For the first time in their acquaintance, Vanbrugh's voice grew tender.

"I — I am almost afraid — "

"Afraid of me?"

"Of you? Oh no, you do not frighten me at all — but I am just a little — " again Dolly hesitated, then as though making a great effort she tried to speak severely. "Mr. Vanbrugh, you must not play with me!"

"Miss Maylands, you have played with me a long time," answered Vanbrugh softly.

"I?"

"Yes."

"Have I? I — I did not mean to," she added thoughtfully.

"Perhaps we have both played in earnest," suggested Vanbrugh.

"But you play with so many people — "

"With whom, for instance?" asked Vanbrugh.

"With Marion, for instance," said Dolly.

"With Mrs. Darche?" Vanbrugh's voice expressed genuine astonishment. "What an extraordinary idea! As though Brett were not my best friend!"

"What of that?"

"Oh, do not pretend you do not understand — especially to-day, when they are both so unhappy — you will do something that will hurt them if you are not careful."

"I wonder —" Dolly did not complete the sentence, but turned away as though leaving it to him.

"I know. So you must not talk of my flirting with Mrs. Darche. It is not just to her nor kind to me — and you do not mean to be unkind to me, do you?"

"To you — of all people!" Her voice was very gentle.

"Of all people in the world, dear?"

"Yes — I think so — of all people." She nodded slowly, and then looked up and let her eyes meet his.

"You think so — you are not quite sure?" asked Vanbrugh, although there was no longer any doubt.

"I am always sure of what I think." Dolly smiled, still looking at him.

"And this is not play any more? This is quite earnest?"

"Quite — quite —" While she was speaking his face was suddenly close to hers and his lips touched her cheek. "Oh! — I did not mean —"

"I did," said Vanbrugh emphatically.

"I see you did," answered Dolly, blushing scarlet.

"Will you not see again —" He leaned towards her again.

"Oh, no! Not on any account!" she cried, pushing him away and laughing. "Besides" — the handle of the door turned as she was speaking — "there are people coming. Oh — I can feel it!" she whispered, rising precipitately with her hands to her cheek. "But I am so happy!" she added, with one more look as she broke from him.

Dolly whispered the last words as Mrs. Wil-

loughby re-entered the room, and Vanbrugh rose to his feet, hardly realising that the crisis of his life had been reached with a laugh and a kiss, but quite as happy as Dolly herself in his thoroughly undemonstrative way. Both were, perhaps, a little ashamed of themselves when they remembered Marion Darche's trouble, and contrasted her anxiety with their own visions of a sunny future; and both felt all at once that they were out of place; if they could not be together without a third person, they wished to be alone.

"I do not really believe that anything will happen," said Vanbrugh, speaking to Mrs. Willoughby. "I do not believe either, that this man is Mrs. Darche's husband, for there is every reason to be sure that John Darche was actually drowned. But in case anything should happen, pray send for me at once. I shall be at home and shall not go out this evening. Good-night, Miss Maylands."

"I am going, too," said Dolly, rather suddenly. "Do you think," she added, turning to Mrs. Willoughby, "that it would be very dreadful if Mr. Vanbrugh took me as far as the corner?"

"What is there dreadful in it?" asked Mrs. Willoughby, who was old-fashioned and remembered the times when young men used to take young girls to parties, and walked home with them unchaperoned.

"Very well, then, will you take me, Mr. Vanbrugh? My maid has not come yet. I only want to go to Mrs. Trehearne's and tell her it is all right about that lace."

"I shall be delighted," answered Vanbrugh, his handsome face lighting up in a way Dolly had never seen.

They had not been gone more than five minutes when Brett rang at the door again and asked for Mrs. Darche. Stubbs looked at him for a moment, and then said that he would inquire. Brett waited in the library, by the deserted tea table, for Cousin Annie had betaken herself to her own room as soon as Dolly and Vanbrugh left, and he wondered who had been there. It was some time before Marion appeared.

"I am glad to see you again," she said, quietly, and holding out her hand. "You went away so suddenly — as though you were anxious about something."

"I am."

"And you have made me anxious, too. You were telling me that a great and final misfortune is hanging over my head. You do not know me. You do not understand me. You do not see that I would much rather know what it is, and face it, than live in terror of it and trust altogether to you to keep it from me."

"But do you not know after all these years, that you can trust me? Do you not trust me now?"

"Yes," Marion answered after a pause. "As a man, my dear friend, I trust you. You do all that a man can do. I can even give you credit, perhaps, for being able to do more than you or any other man can do. But there is more. There is something yet. Be as faithful as you may, as honest as God has made you, and as brave and as strong as you are — you cannot control fate. You do not believe in fate? I do. Well, call it that you please. Circumstances arise which none of us, not the strongest of us, can govern. Whatever this secret is, it means a fact, it means that there is something, somewhere, which might come to

my knowledge, which might make me unutterably miserable, which you some day may not be able to keep from me. Does it not?"

"Yes, it does," said Brett, slowly. "I cannot deny that. You might, you may, come to know of it without my telling you."

"Then tell me now," said Marion earnestly. "Is it not far better and far more natural that this, whatever it may be, should come to me directly from you, instead of through some stranger, unawares, when I am least prepared for it, when I may break down under the shock of it? Do you not think that you, my best friend, could make it easier for me to hear, if any one could?"

"If any one could, yes," answered Brett in a low voice.

"And if no one can, then you at least can make it less cruel. Let me know now when I am prepared for it by all you have said — prepared to hear the most dreadful news I can possibly imagine, something far more dreadful, I am sure, than anything really could be. Let me hear of it from you of all other men."

"No, no, do not ask me!" He turned from

her as though he had finally made up his mind. "Of all men, I should be the last to hurt you. And there is no certainty, perhaps not even a probability, that you should ever know it if I do not tell you."

"Ah, but there is!" she cried, insisting. "You have said so. You told me that a moment ago. No — you must tell me. I will not let you go until you do. I will not leave anything unsaid that I can say — that a woman can say — "

"No, no!"

"Harry, I must know. I will know." She laid her hand upon his arm.

"For heaven's sake!" exclaimed Brett in the utmost distress.

"Harry! You loved me once — " Her voice vibrated audibly.

"Once!" Brett started violently, and turned if possible, paler.

"You made me think so."

"Marion, Marion, don't!"

"I will. Do you remember, Harry, long, long ago when we were almost boy and girl, how you promised, faithfully, sacredly, that if ever I needed you, that if ever I asked your help — "

"And you married John Darche instead of me," said Brett, interrupting her.

"Yes, and I married John Darche," answered Marion, gravely.

"Because you loved him and not me."

"Because I thought, — no, I will not go back to that. There is a nearer time than that in the past, a day we both remember, a day that I am ashamed of, and yet — well you have not forgotten it either. That morning — not so many months ago. It was on that day — that day when my husband was arrested. It was in this very room. You told me that you loved me, and I — you know what I did. It was bad. It was wrong. Call it what you please, but it was the truth. I let you know that I loved you as well as you loved me and better, for I had more to lose. John was alive then. He is dead now — long dead. If I was ashamed then, I am not ashamed now — for I have nothing to be ashamed of. I am showing whether I trust you or not, whether I believe in you, whether I am willing to stake my woman's pride on your man's faithfulness. I loved you then, and I showed you that I did. Harry! I love you now — and I tell you so without a blush."

Brett trembled as though in bodily fear, glanced at her and turned away.

"Great God!" he exclaimed under his breath.

"And you — Harry — you still — Harry — look at me! What is it?"

With wide and loving eyes she looked at him, expecting every instant that he would turn to her. But he did not move. Then suddenly, with a low cry, as though she were mortally hurt, she fell back upon the sofa.

"Oh, my God! you do not love me!"

Her voice was broken and weak, but he heard the words. He turned at last, looked at her, and then knelt down at her side.

"Marion, Marion! dear!" he whispered lovingly, again and again. But she pushed him away. Then he rose to his feet and sat beside her, looking down into her face. "Yes," he said gravely, "you must know my secret now."

"Yes, I know your secret now, your miserable secret." She turned her face from him against the cushion.

"No, you do not know it," he said. "You do not even guess it. But I must tell you now.

Take care. Be strong, be brave. It will hurt you."

While he was speaking Mrs. Darche rose from the sofa and her expression slowly changed as she realised that he had something grave to tell her. She rose slowly, steadying herself, but not taking her eyes from his face.

"Tell me, please. I am ready."

"John Darche is alive, and I have known it almost from the first."

It seemed to Brett that nothing he had ever done in his life had been half so hard. Marion stared at him for a moment, and then once more sank slowly into her seat and covered her face.

"Do you understand me now?" he asked after a long pause. "Do you see now why I have fought so hard against telling you this thing?"

"It is better so," she answered in a low and indistinct tone. "It was better that I should know it now." Then she was silent for a long time. "And is that all you have to tell me after all that I have told you?" she asked at last, as though in a dream.

"All? All, dear?" Suddenly his resolution

broke down. "You know it is not all. I love you — that is all, indeed — and more than I have the right to say or you to hear."

"A right! What is right? Where is right now?"

"Where you are, dear." He was holding both her hands in his.

Then all at once a light came into her face.

"And we can make the rest right, too! Are there no laws? Is there no justice? If this man who has ruined both our lives is not dead — ah! but he is! I know he is. What proof have you? How can you stand there and tell me that I am still bound and tied to a man whose very name is a stain on me, whose mere memory is a disgrace."

"How do I know?" repeated Brett. "It is simple enough. He has written to me. I have his letters. Do you care to see them? Do you know what he says? What he repeats whenever he writes? He began a few days after we heard of his supposed death. I know the letter by heart. 'My dear Brett — I am not dead at all. I know that you love my wife, but I do not propose that you should be happy at my expense.

If you try to marry her I shall be at the wedding to forbid the banns.'"

"He wrote that? He wrote that in his own hand?" The strange emotions that were chasing each other in her heart found quick expression in her face.

"And he has written it often. Would it have made you happier to know it during all these months? Or could I have looked you in the face as an honourable man and told you that I loved you when I alone knew that your husband was alive?" He had drawn back from her now and stood leaning against the mantelpiece with folded arms.

"Oh, I see it all! I see it all now!" she said. "How brave you have been! How good! And now he is coming back to find some new way of hurting us! Oh it is too much! I thought I had borne all. But you were right. There was more to bear."

"Do you know?" Brett began after a moment's pause. "In spite of this story that was in the papers to-day I find it hard to believe that he has really come back. He was quite capable of start-

ing the story himself from a distance for the sake of giving you pain, but he knows as well as we do that if he comes here he comes to serve his time in prison."

Marion seemed to be trying to think over the situation.

"Stop!" she said at last. "You know that there was a woman, too, though we never spoke of her, you and I. But every one knew it. People used to pity me for that before they knew the rest. Do you not think it possible that she may have written those letters to you?"

"Oh, no! I know John Darche's handwriting. I have good cause to know it."

"Yes, I suppose you are right," answered Marion thoughtfully. "Did any one man ever accumulate so much wickedness in a lifetime? He was not satisfied with one crime. And yet he was not the only bad man in the world. What does a girl know of the man she is to marry? She sees him day after day, of course, but she only sees the best side of him. She knows nothing of what he does, nor of what he thinks when he is not with her, but she imagines it all, in

her own way, with no facts to guide her. Then comes marriage. How could I know?"

"Indeed, it would have been hard for any girl to guess what sort of man John Darche was."

"Please do not talk about that."

"And how do you know that I am any better man than John Darche?" asked Brett, suddenly. "What do you know of my comings and goings when I am not here, or how I spend my time? How do you know that I am not bound by some disgraceful tie, as he was? I have been in all sorts of places since we said good-bye on that winter's evening. Do you remember? I have wandered and worked, and done ever so many things since then. How do you know that there is not some woman in my life whom I cannot get rid of?"

He had not changed his position while speaking. When he paused for her answer she went up to him, laying her hands upon his shoulders and looking into his face.

"Harry! is there any other?"

"No, dear." But his eyes answered before he spoke.

"I knew it. You have answered your own question. That is all."

"Thank you." As she drew back he caught her hand and held it, and his words came fast and passionately. "No. That is not all. That is not half. That is not one-thousandth part of what I ought to say. I know it. Thank you? My whole life is not enough to thank you with. All the words I ever heard or know are not enough — the best of words mean so little. And they never do come to me when I want them. But those little words of yours are more to me than all the world beside. I do thank you with all my strength, with all my heart, with all my soul, and I will live for you with all three. Why should I say it? You know it all, dear, much better than it can be said, for you believe in me. But it is good to say — I wish it could have been half as good to hear."

She had listened to each word and looked for each passing expression while he spoke. She looked one moment longer after he had finished, and then turned quietly away.

"It is good to hear — if you only knew how good!" she said softly. "And words are not always empty. When they come from the heart, as ours do, they bring up gold with them — and things better than gold."

CHAPTER XII.

A LONG silence followed. Neither of them, perhaps, realised exactly what had passed, or if they did, actual facts seemed very far away from their dreamland. Marion was the first to feel again the horror of the situation, tenfold worse than before he had last spoken.

"Oh, I cannot bear it!" she said suddenly. "I cannot bear it now—as I could. Really alive, after all—and this story to-day? Have you found out nothing? Have you nothing more to tell me?"

"Yes, there is something to tell you."

"What?"

"Bad news."

"Bad? Worse than—"

"I am afraid so," answered Brett.

"You have told me that he is alive." She laid her hand upon his arm. "Do not tell me that he is here! You said you could not believe it!"

"If I do not, it is only because I have not seen

him with my own eyes. I did not mean to tell you — until — " he stopped.

"Tell me!" cried Marion. "Tell me everything quickly! If you tell me — I can bear it, if you tell me — but not from any one else. Where is he? When did he come? Is he arrested again? Is he in prison?"

"No, not yet. He is in a sailors' lodging-house — if it is he."

"How do you know it? Oh, how can you be so sure, if you have not seen him?"

"None of us have seen him," answered Brett, barely able to speak at all. "Vanbrugh and Brown — they went to find him — I found Brown in Mulberry Street, waiting for news — you know the Police Headquarters are there. Vanburgh had left him — then I came up town again — to you."

"Russell Vanbrugh has been here," said Marion, trying to collect her thoughts. "He told Cousin Annie to give strict orders about reporters."

"He was afraid that Darche might come to try and get money from you — "

"Money! I would give — God knows what I would give."

"I do not believe he will come," said Brett, assuming a confidence he did not feel. "He must know that the house is watched already."

Marion's expression changed. Her face turned paler. The lines deepened and her eyes grew dark. She had made a desperate resolution. She took Brett's hand and looked at him in silence for a moment.

"Good-bye — dear," she said.

She would have withdrawn her hand, but Brett grasped it and pressed it almost roughly to his lips.

"Good-bye," she said again.

It was almost too much to ask of any man. Brett held her hand fast.

"No — not good-bye," he answered with rising passion. "It is not possible. It cannot be, Marion — do not say it."

"I must — you must."

"No — no — no!" he repeated. "It cannot be good-bye. Remember what you said. Is this man who was dead to you and to all the world, if not to me, to ruin both our lives? Are we to bow our heads and submit patiently to such a fate as that? If I had told you long ago that he

was alive, as I alone knew he was, would you not have done your best to free yourself from such a tie, from a man — you said it yourself — whose very name is a stain, and whose mere memory is a disgrace?"

"No," answered Marion resolutely, and withdrawing her hands. "I mean it. This is our good-bye, and this must be all, quite all. Do you think I would ever accept such a position as that? That I could ever feel as though the stain were wiped out and the disgrace forgotten by such a poor formality as a divorce? No! Let me speak! Do not interrupt me yet. If I had known six months ago that John was still alive, I would have done it, and I should have felt perhaps, that it meant something, that I was really free, that the world would forget the worst part of my story, and that I could come to you as myself, not as the wife of John Darche, forger and escaped convict. But I cannot do it now. It is too late, now that he has come back. No power on earth can detach his past from my present, nor clear me of his name. And do you think that I would hang such a weight as that about your neck?"

"But you are wrong," answered Brett, earnestly. "Altogether wrong. The life you have lived during these last months has proved that. Have you ever heard that any one in all the world you know has — I will not say dared — has even thought of visiting on you the smallest particle of your husband's guilt? Oh, no! They say the world is unkind, but it is just in the long run."

"No. People have been kind to me — "

"No. Just, not kind."

"Well, call it what you will," Marion answered, speaking in a dull tone which had no resonance. "People have overlooked my name and liked me for myself. But it is different now. A few good friends may still come, the nearest and dearest may stand by me, but the world will not accept without a murmur the man who has married the divorced wife of a convict. The world will do much, but it will not do that. And so I say good-bye again," she continued after a little pause, "once more this last time, for I will not hamper you, I will not be a load upon you. I will not live to give you children who may reproach you for their mother's sake. We shall be what we were — friends. But, for the rest — good-bye!"

"Marion! Do not say such things!"

"I will, and I must say them now, for I will not give myself another chance," she answered with unmoved determination. "What has been, has been, and cannot be undone. I did wrong months ago on that dreadful morning, when I let you guess that I might love you. I did wrong on that same day, when I prayed you for my sake to help John to escape, when I made use of your love for me, to make you do the one dishonourable action of your life. I have suffered for it. Better, far better, that my husband should have gone then and submitted to his sentence, than that I should have helped him —made you help me—"

"At the risk of your own life," said Brett, interrupting her.

"There was no risk at all, with you all there to help me, and I knew it."

"There was," said Brett, insisting. "You might have burned to death. And as for what I did, I hardly knew that I was doing it. I saw that you were really on fire and I ran to help you. No one ever thought of holding me respon-

sible for what happened when my back was turned. But I would have done more, and you know I would. And now you talk of injuring me, if you divorce that man and let me take your life into mine! This is folly, Marion, this is downright madness!"

Marion looked at him in silence for a moment.

"Harry, would you do it in my place?" she asked suddenly.

"What?"

"If your wife had forged, had been convicted, and sentenced, and you had the public disgrace of it to bear, would you wish to give me your name?"

Brett opened his lips to speak, and then checked himself and turned away.

"You see!" she exclaimed, still watching him.

"No, that would be different," he said at last in a low voice.

"Why different? I see no difference at all. Of course you must say so, any man would in your place. But that does not make it a fact. You would rather cut off your right hand than ask me to marry you with such a stain on your

good name. You can have nothing to answer to that, for it is hard logic and you know it."

"Call it logic, if you will," he answered coming up to her. "It does not convince me. And I will tell you more. I will not yield. I would not be persuaded if I knew that I could be, for I will convince you, I will persuade you that the real wrong and the only wrong is whatever parts a man and a woman who love as we love; who are ready, as you know we are ready, to give all that man and woman can, each for the other, and who will give it, each to the other, in spite of everything, as I will give you my life and my name and everything I have before I die, whether you will have it or not!"

"If I say that I will not accept such a sacrifice, what then?"

"You will accept it," said Brett in a tone of authority.

"Ah, but I will not! Harry!" cried Marion, with a sudden change of voice, "I know that all you say is true. I know how generous you are,

that you would really do all you say you would. I need not say that I thank you. That would mean too little. But I will not take from you one-thousandth part of what you offer. I will not taint your life with mine. You could not answer my question. You could not deny what I said — that if you were in my place, you would suffer anything rather than ask me to marry you. I know — you say it is different — but it is not. Disgrace is just as real from woman to man as from man to woman, and you shall not have it from me nor through me. That is why I say good-bye. That is why you must say it too — for my sake."

"For your sake?"

"Yes," she answered. "Do you think that I could ever be happy again? Do you not see that if I married you now, I should be haunted through every minute of my life by the bitter presence of the wrong done you? Do you not know what I should feel if people looked askance at you, and grew cold in their acquaintance, and smiled to each other when you went by? Do you think that would be easy to bear? Yes, it is

good-bye for my sake, as well as yours. Not lightly — you know it. It means good-bye to love, and hope, and if I live, it means the loss of freedom, too, when John Darche is released from prison."

"What!" cried Brett. "Do you mean to say that you would ever let him come back to you?"

"I mean that I will not be divorced. And he would come back to me — he will come back for help, and I must give it to him when he does."

"Receive that man under your roof!" He could not believe that she was in earnest.

"Yes. Since he is alive he is still my husband. When he comes back after undergoing his sentence I shall have to receive him."

"When you know that you could have a divorce for the asking?"

"Which I would refuse if it were thrust upon me," she answered firmly.

"That would be mad indeed. What can that possibly have to do with me?"

"This," she said. "We are speaking this last time. I will not be divorced from him; do you

know why? Because if I were — if I were free — I should be weak, and marry you. Do you understand now? Try and understand me, for I shall not say it again — it is too hard to say."

"Not so hard as it is to believe."

"But you will try, will you not?"

"No."

The monosyllable had scarcely escaped from his lips, short, energetic and determined, when he was interrupted by Stubbs, who seemed destined to appear at inopportune moments on that day. He was evidently much excited, and he stood stock still by the door. At the same time there was a noise outside, of many feet and of subdued voices. Stubbs made desperate gestures.

"Mr. Brett, sir! Will you please come outside, sir!" He was hardly able to make himself understood.

"What is the matter?" asked Marion, severely.

"I cannot help it, sir! Indeed I cannot, Madam!" protested the distressed butler.

Brett understood.

"There is trouble," he said quickly to Marion, holding out his hands as though he wished to

protect her, and touching her gently. "Please go away. Leave me here."

"Trouble?" She was not inclined to yield.

"Yes. It must be he — if you have to see him, this is not the place."

"But —"

With his hands, very tenderly, he pushed her toward the door at the other end of the room, the same through which John Darche had once escaped. She resisted for a moment — then without a word she obeyed his word and touch and went out, covering her eyes with her hand.

"Now then, what is it?" asked Brett, turning sharply around as he closed the door.

"I could not help it, sir!" Stubbs repeated. "There is a man in the hall as says he is Mr. John — leastwise he says his name is John Darche, though he has got a beard, sir, which Mr. John never had, as you may remember, sir, and there is a lot of policemen in plain clothes and otherwise, and Mr. Brown says they are pressmen, and the driver of the cab, and Michael Curly, and the expressman —"

"What do all these people want?" inquired Brett, sternly. "Turn them out."

"It is a fact, sir, just as I tell you — and so help me the powers, sir, here they are coming in and I cannot keep them out — I cannot, not if I was a dozen Stubbses!"

Before he had finished speaking, a number of men had pushed past him into the room, led by Mr. Brown, very much out of breath and trying his best to control the storm he had raised.

"What is this disturbance, Brown?" asked Brett angrily. "Who are these people?"

"It is the man, Brett!" cried Mr. Brown triumphantly, and pushing forward a burly and bearded individual in a shabby "guernsey" with a black rag tied in a knot round his neck. "Now just look at him, and tell me whether he has the slightest resemblance to John Darche."

"He is no more John Darche than I am! Take him away!"

"Out with you!" cried Stubbs, only too anxious to enforce the order.

"He said he was John Darche," said one of the men from Mulberry Street.

The man refused to be turned out by Stubbs

and stood his ground, evidently anxious to clear himself. He was an honest-looking fellow enough, and there was a twinkle in his bright blue eyes as though he were by no means scared, but rather enjoyed the hubbub his presence created.

"No, sir," he said in a healthy voice that dominated the rest. "I am no more John Darche than you are, sir, unless that happens to be your name, which I ask your pardon if it is. But I said I was, and so the bobbies brought me along. But this gentleman here, he showed me the papers, that there was trouble about John Darche, so I just let them bring me, which I had no call to do, barring I liked, being a sailor man and quick on my feet."

"Well then, who are you?" asked Brett. "And where is John Darche?"

"John Darche is dead, sir, and I buried him on the Patagonian shore."

"Dead?" cried Brett. The colour rushed to his face, and for a moment the room swam with him. "Can you prove that, my man?"

"Well, sir, I say he is dead, because I saw him die and buried him — just so, as I was telling you."

This was more than Stubbs could bear in his present humour.

"Dead, is he? Mr. John's dead, is he? This man says he is dead, and he comes here saying as he is him."

"Be quiet, Stubbs," said Brett. "Tell your story, my man, and be quick about it," he added.

"Yes, sir," said the man, taking his hands from his pockets, and standing squarely before Brett. "That is what I came to do if these sons of guns will let me talk. John Darche was working his passage as cook, sir, and we was wrecked down Magellan way, and some was drowned, poor fellows, and some was taken off, worse luck for us. But I said I would stick to the ship if Darche would, and we should get salvage money. We had not much of a name to lose, either of us, so we tried it, but the cook was not much to boast of for a sailor man, and we could not bring her through, and she went to pieces on the Patagonian shore. The cook, that was John Darche, he caught his death, what with too much salt water, and too little to eat, and died two days after we got ashore. So I buried him. And seeing as my

own name wan't of much use to me, being well known about those parts for a trifle of braining a South American devil in Buenos Ayres, I took his, which wan't no more use to him neither, and somehow or other I got here, by the help of Almighty God and an Eyetalian captain, and working my passage and eating their blooming boiled paste. And I soon found out what sort of a name I had taken from my dead mate, for he seems to have been pretty well known to these here gentlemen. But I daresay as you can swear, sir, that I ain't John Darche as you knew, and maybe as I ain't wanted on my own account, these gentlemen will come and have a drink with me and call quits."

"Have you got anything to prove this story?" Brett asked, when the man had finished.

"Well, sir, there's myself to prove it," said the sailor. "I don't know that I should care for more proof. And there's my dead mate's watch, too. He had a watch, he had. He was a regular swell though he was working his passage as cook. But I had to leave it with my uncle this morning."

Brett drew a long breath and clasped his hands nervously together.

"I suppose you can set this man at liberty, upon my declaration that he is not John Darche, and after hearing his story," he said, turning to the police officer who stood near the sailor.

"Oh yes, sir," answered the latter. "I guess that will be all right. If not, we'll make it right in five minutes."

"Well then, I must ask you to go away for the present — and as quickly as possible. Take that with you, my man, and come and see me to-morrow morning. My name is Brett. The butler will write my address for you."

"I don't want your money, sir," said the sailor.

"Oh yes, you do," answered Brett, with a good-humoured smile. "Go and get your watch out of pawn and bring it with you."

"Very well, sir," said the sailor.

As they were going out, it struck Brett that he perhaps owed something to Mr. Brown who, after all, had taken a great deal of trouble in the matter.

"Mrs. Darche will be very much obliged to you, Brown," he said. "But I am not sure that the matter is ended. It would be awfully good

of you to put the thing through, while I break the news to Mrs. Darche. Could you not go along with them and see that the man is really set at liberty?"

Mr. Brown was a good-natured man, and was quite ready to do all that was asked of him. Brett thanked him once more, and he left the house with the rest.

When they were all gone, Stubbs came back, evidently very much relieved at the turn matters had taken.

"Please go into the drawing-room," said Brett, "and ask Mrs. Darche to come here one moment, if she can speak to me alone, and keep every one else out of the room. You understand, Stubbs."

"Yes, sir," answered the butler. "But it is the Lord's own mercy, sir, especially the watch." He left the room in search of Mrs. Darche.

Scarcely a moment elapsed before she entered the room.

"Stubbs said you wanted to see me," she said in a voice that shook with anxiety.

Brett came forward to meet her, and standing quite close to her, looked into her eyes.

"Something very strange has happened," he said, with a little hesitation. "Something — something very, very good — can you bear the shock of a great happiness, dear?"

"Happiness," she repeated. "What is it? Oh, yes!" she exclaimed, suddenly understanding. "Oh! thank God, I see it in your eyes! It is not true? He is not here? — oh, Harry!"

"Yes. That is it. The whole story was only a fabrication. He is not here. You see I cannot let you wait a moment for the good news. It is so good. So much better even than I have told you."

"Better!" she cried as the colour rose to her pale cheeks. "What could be better? Oh, it is life, it is freedom — it is almost more than I can bear after this dreadful day!"

"But you must bear more," said Brett, smiling.

"More pain?" she asked with a little start. "Something else?"

"No. More happiness."

"Ah, no! There is no more!"

"Yes there is. Listen. There is a reason why the story could not be true, why it is absolutely impossible that it should be true."

"Impossible?" She looked up suddenly. "You cannot say that."

"Yes I can," he answered. "We have seen the last of John Darche. He will never come back."

"Never?" cried Marion. "Never at all? What do you mean?"

"Never, in this world," Brett answered gravely.

She seized his arm with sudden energy and looked into his face.

"What? No — it cannot be true! Oh, do not deceive me, for the love of Heaven!"

"John Darche is dead."

"Dead!" In the pause that followed, she pressed her hand to her side as though she could not draw breath.

"Oh! no! no — it cannot be true. It is another story. Oh, why did you tell me?"

"It is true. The man who was with him when he died was here a moment ago."

"Ah, you were right," she said faintly. "It is almost too much."

Brett's arm went round her and drew her towards him.

"No," he answered, speaking gently in her ear, "not too much for you and me to bear together. Think of all that has died with him — think of all the horror and misery and danger and fear that he has taken out of the world with him. Think that there is nothing now between you and me. Nothing — not the shadow of a nothing. That our lives are our own now, and each the other's, yours mine, mine yours, forever and always. Ah, Marion, dear, is that too much to bear?"

"Almost," she said as her head sank upon his shoulder. "Ah, God! that hell and heaven should be so near."

"And such a heaven! Love! Darling! Sweetheart! Look at me!"

"Harry!" She opened her eyes. "Love! No — find me other words for all you are to me."

She drew his face down to hers and their lips met.

THE END.

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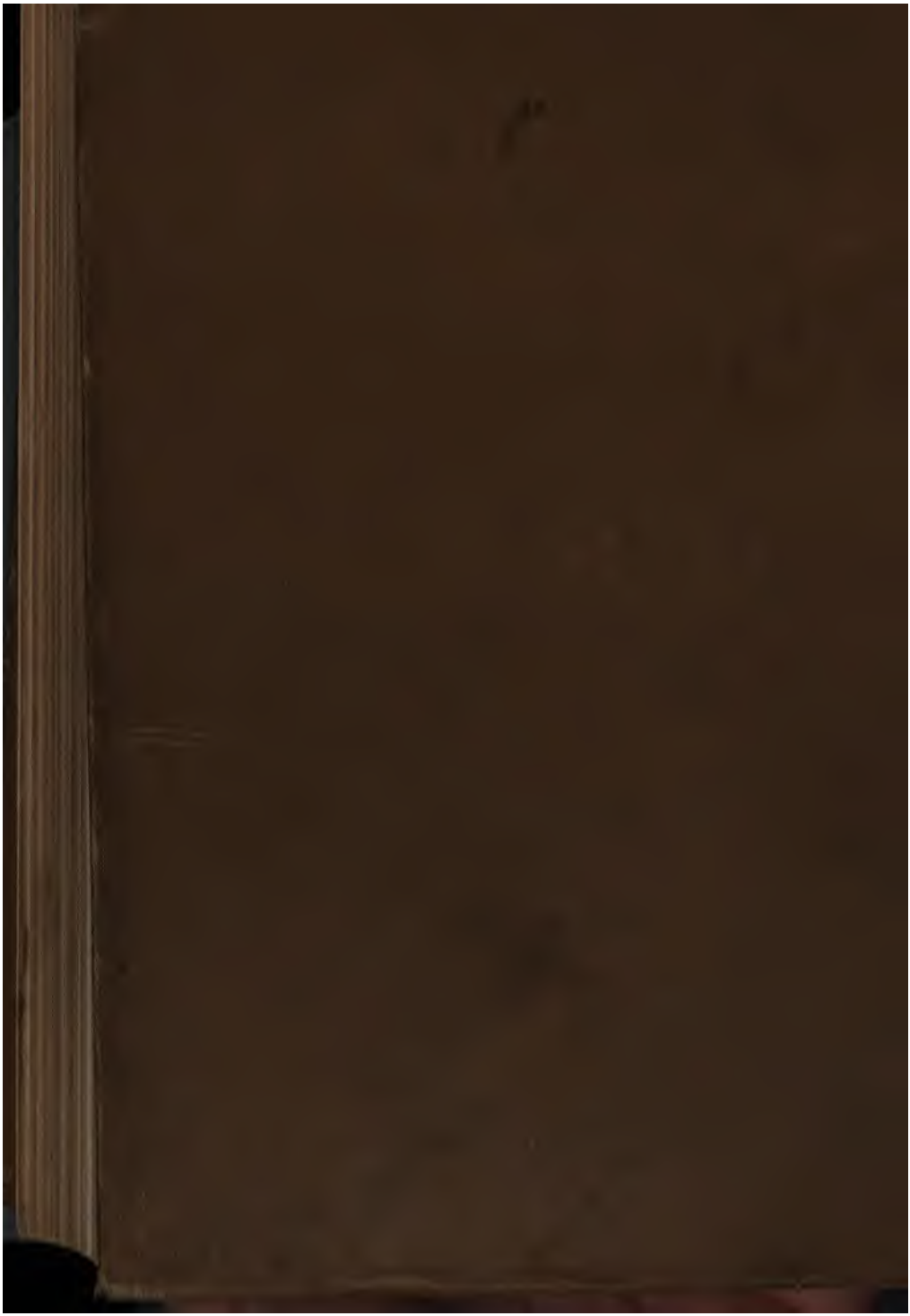
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